System

The chairman

Issue No. 17 – £24 / €28 / $33

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Counter culture

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BELOVED

Serena Williams with GG Marmont Bag

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THE BELOVED SHOW

BELOVED

Diane Keaton with Horsebit 1955 Bag

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CHANEL

EMMA is an actor known for her portrayal of a princess in a hit streaming series.

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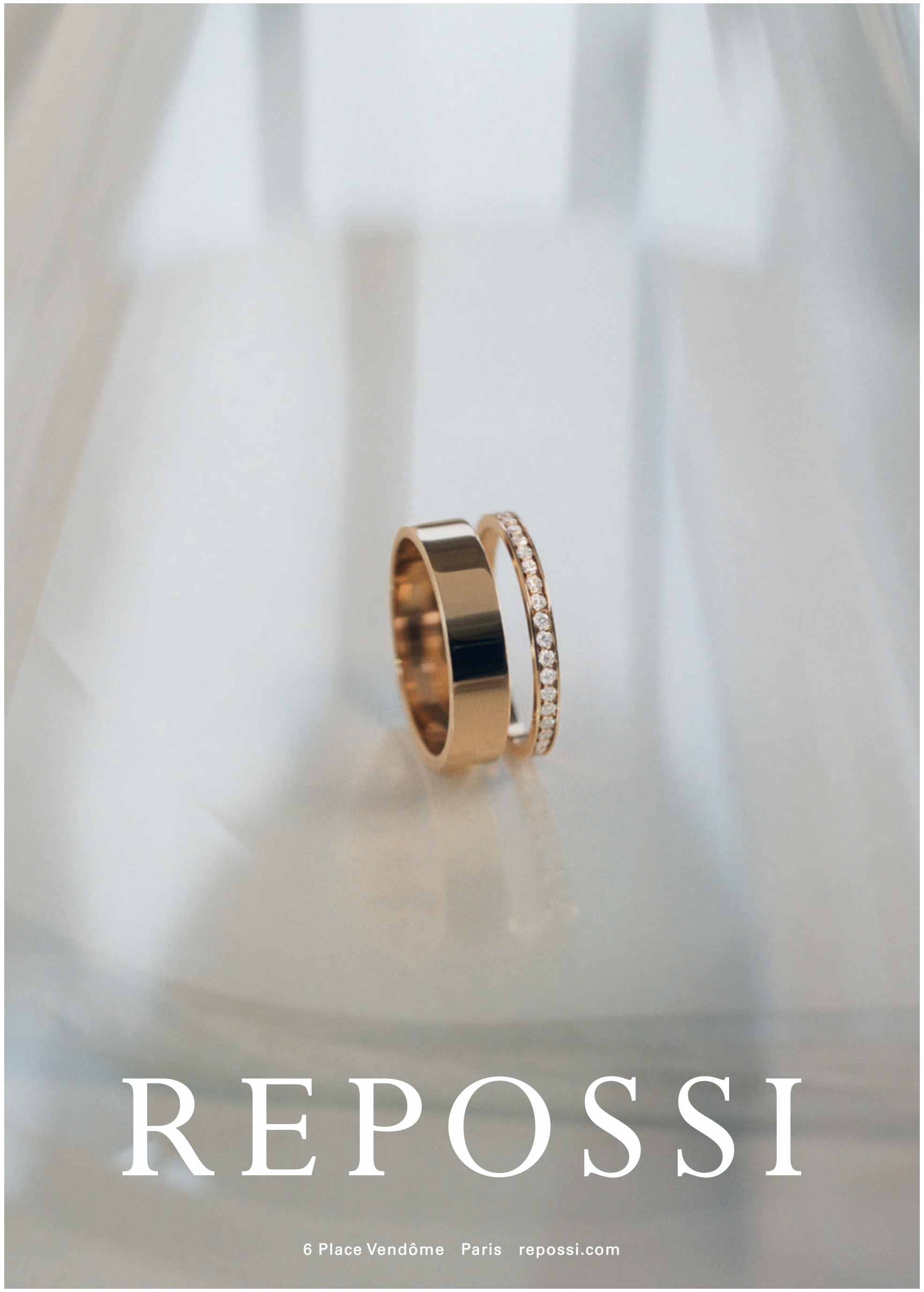

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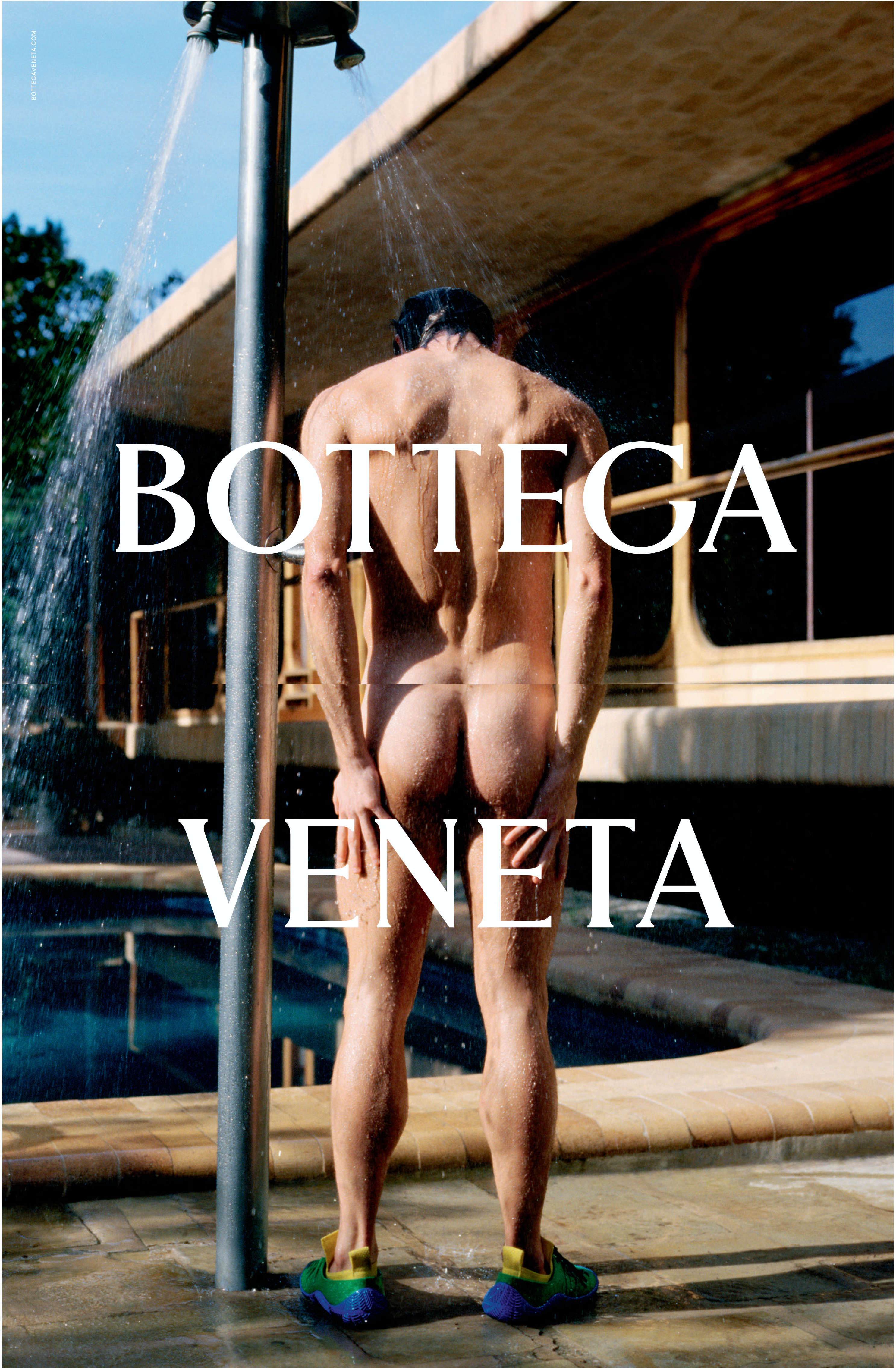
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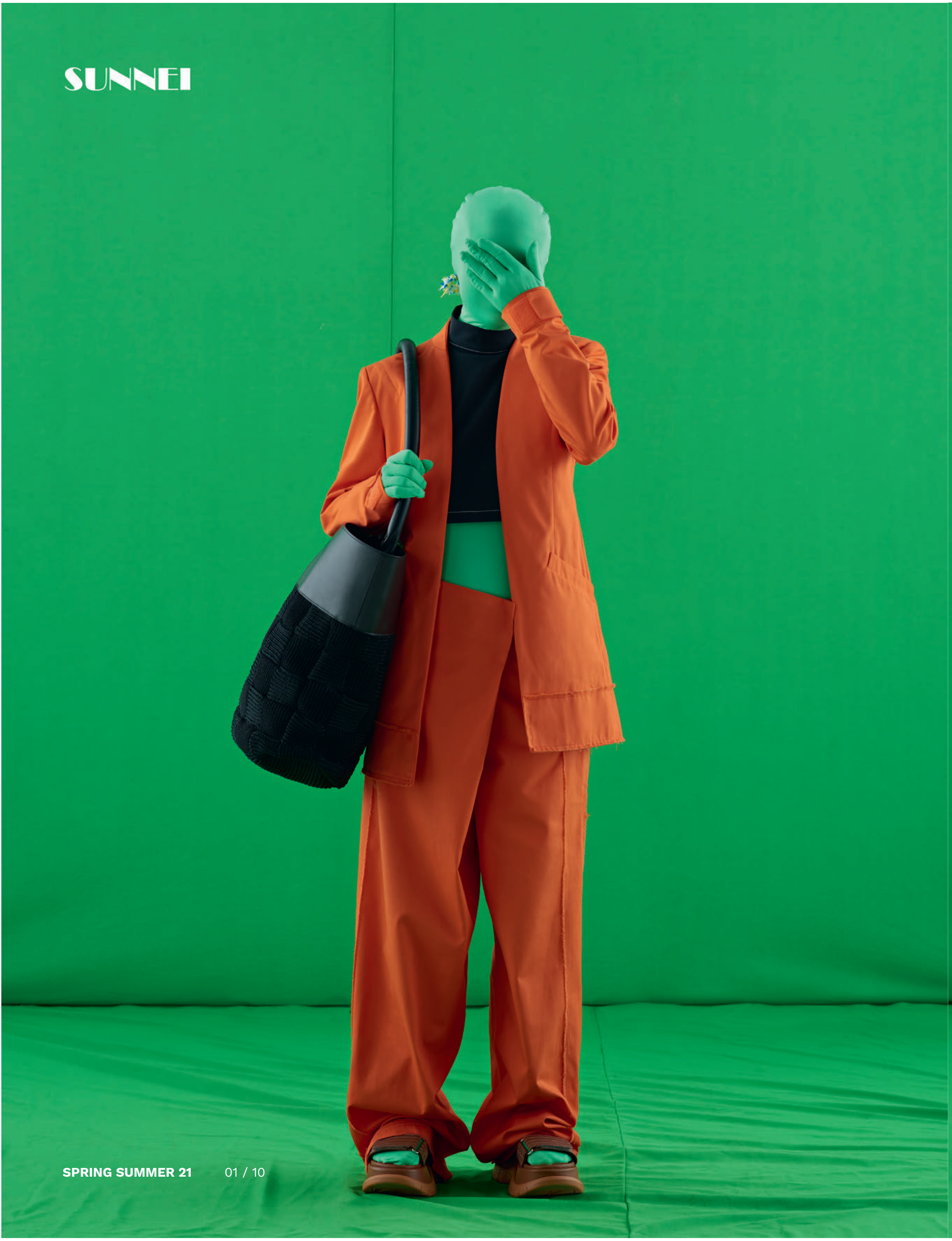

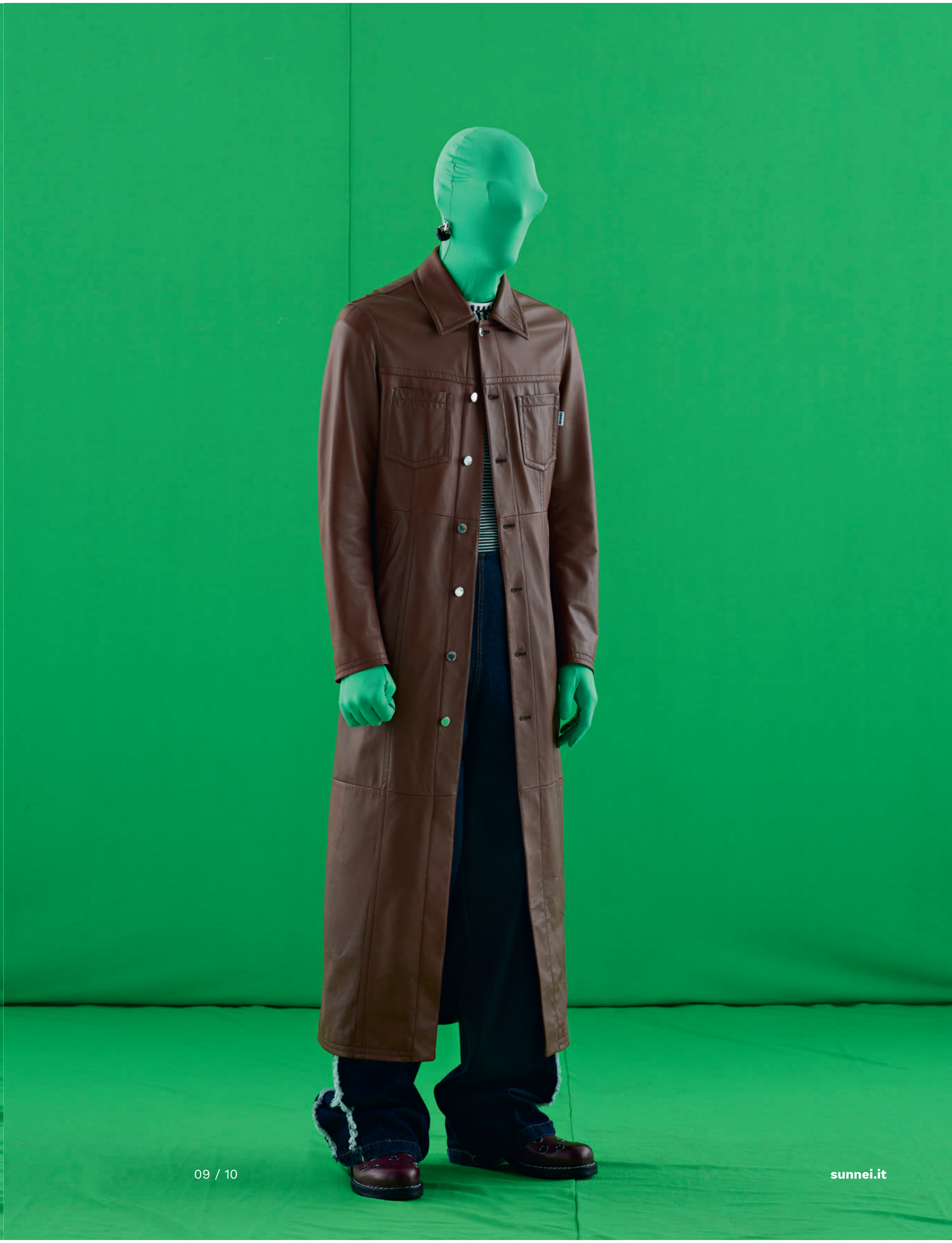

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That second evening,
while I was waiting for
"The Third Man" to come
on, Mrs. Barbour
(all Valentino-ed up
and on her way out the door
to an event at the Frick)
stopped by
Andy's room and
announced
that I was going
back to school
the next day.

*Words from 'The Goldfinch'
by Donna Tartt*

VALENTINO

Right now, it feels like our lives are collectively in limbo, while in a continuous state of change. Much of the world is static, yet in flux. And the shifts occurring in the fashion industry feel as liberating and long overdue as they do nebulous and unpredictable. In particular, there seems to be an acute sense of 'middle space' currently emerging from the blurring of physical and digital, consumer and creator, cultural and commercial, local and global.

In February this year, it was reported that SKP Beijing had become the highest-performing luxury department store in the world, overtaking long-time leader Harrods. The news highlighted what is arguably *the* defining transition (pre- *and* post-pandemic) for the future of the global luxury fashion market: Chinese consumer appetite and purchasing power is now sustaining the profitability of Western brands. In conversation with one of this issue's cover stars, SKP's chairman and founder Mr Ji (page 42), designer Jonathan Anderson puts it more bluntly: 'In earlier periods, we [Western brands] dictated what Chinese consumers wanted, whereas now they are telling *us* what they want. This is clearly going to initiate a fascinating moment for fashion in general. The power has shifted.'

How this all plays out remains to be seen. While part of a far wider evolution in geopolitics, society, economy and, yes, power, these changes do throw up some pertinent questions for the (Western) world of fashion: how might this shift affect the face and fortunes of Europe's luxury conglomerates? Will it influence fashion's stylistic decisions, its systems and structures, or indeed, its ethics? When will we see internationally recognized Chinese brands? In fact, will geographic or cultural provenance even continue to hold the same value, and with it the respective preconceptions we still hold about, say, Made in Italy or Made in China?

In Mr Ji's other conversation in this issue, with Patrizio Bertelli (page 52), the Prada CEO offers a word of advice: 'We shouldn't be afraid or hold back. It is part of this overall global integration that we all require. We mustn't consider people as opponents; we have to let globalization play out and eventually it will turn out to be positive for all.'

Alexander
McQUEEN

ALEXANDER MCQUEEN AT 'FIRST LIGHT',
A FILM BY JONATHAN GLAZER

alexandermcqueen.com

‘From the most poverty-stricken times to the most beautiful.’

The transformation of China, the rise of SKP, and the story of Mr Ji.

Interviews by Jonathan Wingfield
Photographs by Juergen Teller
Creative partner: Dovile Drizyte

In February this year, it was reported that SKP Beijing had become the highest-performing luxury department store in the world, overtaking long-time leader Harrods. While SKP is still relatively unknown to consumers outside of China, for many in the industry the news represents the latest stage in a broader shift in global luxury fashion, one being further exacerbated by Covid-19. China's ever-growing consumer appetite and purchasing power (both pre- *and* post-Covid) is sustaining the profitability of many Western brands, and increasingly influencing their strategic and creative decisions.

SKP launched its first store, located in Beijing's Central Business District, in 2007. The project of Mr Ji – as its founder and chairman, Ji Xiao An is better known – SKP Beijing currently stocks more than 1,100 brands (of which more than 90% are international), and in 2020, had sales of 17.7 billion renminbi (€2.27 billion). All were made in the physical store – SKP has yet to develop e-commerce. Beyond the store's luxury mall-like appearance and gigantism (its floor space is equivalent to 25 football pitches), SKP has also become a key strategic partner for many Western brands navigating the myriad specificities of the Chinese market in their quest for more consumer hype, devotion and sales.

Just before the pandemic hit China, Mr Ji launched a younger, edgier store, SKP-S. Located across the road from SKP Beijing and designed in collaboration with South Korean eyewear disruptors Gentle Monster, it takes the existing luxury retail concept and transforms it into an other-worldy hyper-sensorial experience. Within SKP-S's four storeys, a mix of high-end streetwear and luxury brands including Prada, Sacai and Gucci are accessed via Kubrick-esque LED corridors, replica lunar landscapes, and a theatrical farmyard in which robotic sheep 'graze'.
This is department store meets *daka*, the attention-grabbing Chinese culture of using social media to show off the people, places and products you experience IRL.

Beyond its playground of click bait, however, SKP-S has a dynamic recipe for success: a carefully curated selection of all the right brands, including many that provide limited-edition SKP-only products, presented within a spectacle-heavy ancillary world in which culture and commerce collide. Indeed, a key feature of SKP-S is T-10, a cultural space on the top floor, that in the forthcoming year will stage exhibitions including a Valentino show curated by Pierpaolo Piccioli, a Juergen Teller solo show, and *Style in Revolt*, the world's most comprehensive survey of streetwear to date.

Eager to delve a little deeper, *System* has spent the past six months exploring the world of SKP. Given this is the first time Mr Ji has agreed to be interviewed, we took full advantage and also invited Patrizio Bertelli, CEO of Prada, and Jonathan Anderson, creative director of Loewe and JWAnderson, to record conversations with him, before Mr Ji led photographer Juergen Teller on a personal guided tour (remotely, of course) of SKP-S – sheep, robots and all.

What emerges over the following pages is the sense that in SKP's blurring of physical and digital, cultural and commercial, local and global, Chinese and Western, lies the template for the future of luxury retail.

! NOBODY* KNOWS IT?
ER WERE WE #0202 THERE!? (ENT
)000 + 30ZKAA*/D-23

'When I was young, I had many dreams, but running a retail business was never one of them.'

Mr Ji in conversation.
25 January 2021.

Part I
The rise of SKP

Jonathan Wingfield: Could you start by telling me about some of your retail experiences prior to launching SKP?
Mr Ji: I started in business with retail and I've never done anything else. I've always been interested in opening different types of retail – department stores, shopping centres, supermarkets, restaurants – which is what I've done.

> **'During the Cultural Revolution, young people yearned to wear green military uniforms and ride Phoenix bicycles to express a fashion language.'**

You entered luxury fashion retail in 2007. What was the landscape for this sector in China like around that time?
Mr Ji: China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, which was a watershed in the country's fashion and luxury industry. According to the rules of WTO entry, luxury brands were able to open direct retail stores in China legally, and so many international brands from Europe and other markets began to expand their retail distribution in the Chinese market. At that time, the best-known luxury retail venues in China were Plaza 66 in Shanghai and China World Mall in Beijing; they were the two places with the highest number of luxury brands. The brands then started to open their own direct retail stores, predominantly in shopping malls.

What led you to believe luxury fashion represented a strong opportunity?
After 2008, in the midst of the global subprime crisis, the Chinese government implemented a 4 trillion renminbi economic stimulus plan, which pushed China's economy onto a faster development track. Urban residents' incomes increased significantly, especially after 2010, and the trend of rising consumption intensified. We sensed the huge potential and growth opportunities of China's high-end consumer market. As a result, we became determined to make a fresh start with SKP. I had already hoped to build a high-quality fashion lifestyle destination in Beijing, but I decided to significantly upgrade the project's positioning. We redefined the structure of all categories and brands, updated more than 60% of the product offerings, and reduced the overall number of brands by 40%. Although SKP had been operational for less than four years, we were still determined to completely update and upgrade the store's standards. Not just a redecoration, but a complete revamp in all areas: from the mechanical and electrical systems, to its spatial layout and all audiovisual experiences. In short, we built a completely new store, as well as a completely new SKP brand.

How did you go about securing the presence of those international luxury fashion brands for the revamped SKP?
It was difficult at the beginning. In any business, if you want to make bold changes, you are bound to face big challenges. Thankfully, some important people anticipated that our concept would succeed: Michael Burke, CEO of Louis Vuitton, was among the first who came out to support me, as did Mr Pinault; Mr Bertelli also said that he had faith in me and appreciated the changes I was about to make. Most of the others took an attitude of half-belief and half-doubt, though, wondering whether we could actually create what I had in mind. My experience is that before people see the physical outcome of your work, there are always question marks. In the end, we won the trust, understanding and support of most brands. The key was to have patience, and I'm very grateful to all our partners for that.

How did you present the concept to the brands?
I wanted the brands to understand that SKP is a retailer, not a real-estate developer. At that time, both in Hong Kong and across the mainland, real-estate developers were dominating the fashion and luxury business, creating a building, and then just leasing spaces to brands. Of course, that is a valid business model, but as a retailer, I've always understood retail differently. I think the fundamental driving force of retail growth comes from the customer experience. With this in mind, we hoped to establish a fashion-retail ecosystem based on a specific product-category structure, while redefining the business model according to consumers' shopping habits and requirements. Concretely, this meant that at SKP, we required each brand to open multiple in-store locations, each one based on a different product category. This was something most brands had never previously done in Asia and went against how they were used to operating. That presented a challenge to their management, even though this concept of fashion retail is simply more in line with shoppers' habits. We hope to establish the SKP fashion ecosystem – with its own air, sunshine, lakes, streams, trees, grass, flowers, animals and warmth – in order to create 'oxygen' for the industry.

You mentioned before that there was an upgrade in Chinese consumption patterns. What tangible evidence did you have to support this?
Living in Beijing, we feel impulses of change taking place in the world every day, through things we see and hear. We saw many Chinese travelling abroad – to the United States, to Europe – and witnessed crowds of Chinese customers shopping in Paris. This kind of insight doesn't always require specific supporting data. Financial figures are just the surface of the ocean; the broader trends of social development influence the overall ocean current, and this is what determines real change.

> **'I had the opportunity to attend university. Before that I was a farmer, I joined the army, and I worked in factories. These were all precious experiences'**

Was there a risk that the consumer experience of, say, shopping for a bag in Louis Vuitton's flagship on the Champs-Élysées simply couldn't be replicated locally in Beijing?
Shopping is part of everyone's travel experience, but no one can travel and shop all the time, so consumers will inevitably return to their home cities and shops. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the Japanese were buying all over the world, and many returned home to shop. Then came the Koreans and the Chinese buying overseas. There are three factors that influence Chinese shoppers overseas. First, the unique fashion experience in Europe; second, buying fashion goods is a process that comes with a spiritual value of satisfaction; third, the price difference. These things change greatly over time. Prices will drop over time as we build up our own buying capability – working directly with the brands and without middlemen – and when tariffs decline as China further opens up. We have a genuine opportunity for SKP to serve Chinese customers better if we are then providing improved experiences in a better fashion ecosystem than in Europe.

Let's talk about that price difference. It's such an important aspect in the dynamic between Chinese consumers and luxury Western goods.
Price difference is an inevitable factor in the tourism market: there is always a certain price difference between the domestic and international market. This price strategy itself is a reasonable arrangement and is composed of three parts. First, the impact of import taxes; second, exchange-rate fluctuation; third, differences caused by non-tariff factors. Over the past decade, the price gap has generally been narrowing. First of all, China's import tax has continued to decrease; second, many brands have adjusted their relevant policies and adopt a more reasonable 'global pricing strategy'; third, companies such as SKP can now buy directly wholesale from brands. The price gap will continue to close in the future. Especially in the post-Covid-19 era, more consumers will spend more money in their home cities. Of course, many Chinese people will resume travelling after the pandemic, but we may not be able to return to what it was before the pandemic.

Import tax has been decreasing, while brands will be giving wholesale discounts because of the volume of products being bought by a company like SKP. So is there a possibility that those prices could drop to the same level as in brands' home territories, or even less?
At present, our wholesale business does not have big enough a volume, even though we have more than 500 brands from whom we buy wholesale directly in Europe. At SKP the main key performance indicator for buyers has always been the sell-through rate, though: we want to ensure we buy merchandise that our customers want to buy, rather than just pursue large-scale wholesale purchasing. Moving forward, we're looking into how we can collaborate more closely with brands to create exclusive products for SKP, including co-branding. The differentiation of our products is the most important thing for us.

SKP's post-2011 upgrade was taking place while social media was really starting to gain momentum. To what extent was SKP as a digital experience part of your thinking at the time?
In China, everything happens so fast, and from 2000 onwards, we already felt the changes that were about to happen. Digital technology is, of course, the great advance in modern-day human society, and has completely transformed human communication, knowledge and information transmission.

Nonetheless, I think that no matter how developed digital channels are, it is difficult to substitute the experience and emotion one gets in a physical space.

Did the rise of Net-a-Porter and more general shifts towards direct-to-consumer brand operations make you nervous about your physical-first strategy?
I remember Macy's starting to make large-scale digital investments after 2000. My friend Terry Lundgren [Macy's CEO at the time] told me they hired more than 200 experts, established offices in New York, and allocated huge budgets. Online business was growing fast; they were a pioneer in omni-channel, and had a great impact on the industry. Yet I always felt that their transformation had not been clearly thought out. You have to think about the connections between the online business and your existing business, and the contradictions and conflicts that might arise between them. It's not just about how much your online business grows, but also whether your *overall* sales are growing. If you just move your offline business online, is that growth actually healthy? Of course, there is no absolute distinction between online and offline in this society, and although SKP does not currently engage in direct online transactions, we obviously use many digital tools. The point is not whether you do online transactions, but *how* you do them and whether they offer an experience consistent with SKP's standards. I believe it will be figured out one day, but in the meantime we are focused on improving SKP by doing what we are good at first.

> **'I looked up to Walmart stores and Kmart hypermarkets in the US, and would ask myself how could someone grow such a large-scale business?'**

You mentioned Macy's. I'm curious to get your thoughts on the current state of the US department-store industry.
There are still good department stores in the US, such as Nordstrom. Some others have problems, but each situation is unique. The reasons for this are often complex, but one of the fundamental reasons is that they are no longer willing to change the experience of their physical stores. It feels like they have given up on innovation for their existing businesses. They have invested too much money in digital sales. The deeper problem is that there are simply too many shopping malls and department stores in the United States and they all have similar offerings. I should add that I haven't studied the retail industry in the US in depth, so this is just my gut feeling. Fundamentally, there is a problem with the structure of supply and demand. With online commerce joining the game and taking a chunk of the share, the bricks-and-mortar market is in trouble – supply is now far larger than demand.

Historically, Western brands would be offered favourable rents by Chinese mall owners to entice them to their malls. Has that dynamic now shifted?
Under normal circumstances, leading brands have a greater say, but the key to the decision is about creating value for *both* parties. I pay more attention to how to establish a more benign interactive and cooperative relationship. SKP is not a real-estate developer that just collects rents, and we also don't want to be just a retailer. We wish to become a broader and more active participant in the fashion industry. I think the relationship between a retailer and a brand should be a collaboration based on mutual understanding, trust and support. Of course, there will be discussions on the balance of interests between SKP and brands. However, what matters is the value creation of joint cooperation – how to make the cake bigger for everyone.

Can you give me an example of the conversations that you have with the business leaders in Europe like Mr Pinault, Mr Arnault or Mr Bertelli? My understanding is that you are able to influence Europeans to be more innovative.
Cooperation is a long-term process. It is impossible for any brand to enjoy a high growth rate all the time; business performance will always fluctuate. At SKP, brands that perform well deserve respect, of course, but when a brand faces difficulties, I prefer to go to Europe and meet the CEO to tell them what I have seen, and analyse how to make the business take off again. It's more about communication. My job is to help partners do business correctly in the Chinese market, while protecting the SKP ecosystem. All brands hope to have larger retail space in SKP. Even if this cannot be fulfilled, we won't simply refuse, but rather work to find a feasible solution.

Let's talk about SKP-S and the ways this edgier store engages with a new generation of Chinese consumers.
SKP-S is another bold venture anchored in the concept of innovation. As you know, innovations tend to be driven by fringe forces. Over the past six or seven

years, we have noticed that some street-fashion brands have been expressing rebellious, bold views, with an attitude towards fashion that uses a completely different vernacular. By doing this, they attract a younger generation who love what they stand for and are willing to buy their products at high prices. For many years I have been hoping to build a store that presents street-fashion culture in a completely different manner and context to anything we've done before. The challenge has been how to demonstrate the power of street fashion in new and exciting ways, while adhering to the consistency of SKP's overall positioning. We have been inspired by artistic and technological elements, as well as the concept of collaborations, and I was lucky to find excellent partners with whom to realize these ideas.

Ultimately, the aim of SKP-S was to create a unique space of social experience for the younger generation, and it has worked: it not only attracts a younger customer base, but has also become a *daka* ['must-see'] destination that they visit frequently.

> **'Most of the luxury fashion brands took an attitude of half-belief and half-doubt, wondering whether we could actually create what I had in mind.'**

This idea of *daka* feels entrenched in the SKP-S concept. The spaces throughout SKP-S that you have orchestrated with creative collaborators such as Gentle Monster, Sybarite, United Visual Artists and Weirdcore take shopping into the realm of the spectacular.
Building the concept of SKP-S was a deeply creative process, one that was developed in a free state and steeped in subjective judgement and awareness. I didn't deliberately think about who I wanted to please; it's more a question of conjuring up the most dream-like place for the market and the customers. As long as you firmly believe in your feelings, and you have a clear picture of them in your mind, you should go all out to make every detail perfect.

In SKP-S, integrating the core shopping experience into a cultural world is key. You've added T-10, a cultural space on the store's fourth floor that has a world-class exhibition programme. Why do Chinese customers find these cultural moments appealing and important?
Cultural experiences are always important parts of the SKP ecosystem. At SKP RENDEZ-VOUS, we host many art exhibitions and book launches, with an emphasis on the interaction between famous Chinese artists or writers and our customers. T-10 is a more radical concept: a space of 4,000 square metres, in which visual artists, streetwear creatives and fashion brands can perform a variety of repertoires.

SKP has its roots in Beijing, but do you have plans for it beyond the city?
We opened SKP Xi'an in 2018, which is a very high-quality project. In 2020, sales there increased by 37%. In the next three to five years, SKP will open in Chengdu and Wuhan, two of the most important cities in China, each with a population over 10 million, and with huge market potential. These projects will be approximately the scale of SKP Beijing, but always within our philosophy of disciplined growth and quality expansion, requiring time and patience.

Part II
The (r)evolution of the Chinese consumer

I wanted to look into China's recent past to better understand how contemporary Chinese consider and relate to buying fashion and shopping. What are your own thoughts on how people perceived fashion in the past?
China is a country that has a nearly 5,000-year-old civilization. If you understand China's culture and history, you see that there is an extremely deep fashion DNA in Chinese cultural genes. Of course, in different times, there are different ways of understanding and pursuing fashion culture. There is a very famous novel, *A Dream of Red Mansions,* which contains detailed descriptions of the pursuit and enjoyment of the exquisite fashion, culture, and art in the 18th century. In the 1930s, during the Republic of China in Shanghai, there were many films, dramas and literary works that showed the fashion trend of consumerism at that time. Even in the era of the Cultural Revolution, young people yearned to be able to wear green military uniforms and ride Phoenix bicycles to express a fashion language of the revolutionary era. For young people today in China, fashion consumption is a natural evolution in their lives when they become better off. The Chinese are willing to accept new things and understand fashion. They learn quickly and imitate well. The Chinese fashion consumer culture has already shown huge growth over the past decade, and the underlying logic of that has been driven by Chinese

cultural values. Income has risen, and the desire for a better life has become the driving force behind a younger generation of Chinese consuming fashion.

You mention an ability to imitate. To what extent do you think China's recent pursuit of fashion has been about emulating Western fashion?
First comes imitation, then comes a deeper understanding and personalized pursuit. Since the reforms and opening up, Western fashion culture has impacted upon Chinese consumers from all directions: Hollywood movies, film and television dramas became accessible in China; Chinese people began travelling to Europe and other places; numerous multinational companies entered China and with that came foreign company executives and their families. Their cultural tastes and attitudes towards fashion have inevitably had an impact on the mentality of the new generation of Chinese consumers. Louis Vuitton came to Beijing in the early 1990s and opened a small boutique in the Peninsula Hotel. It was a visionary move. China at the time was neither as rich nor as developed as it is today, but it was full of life and vitality. The controlled economy had been dismantled, and the new market system was still being established; market order had yet to be created. Louis Vuitton showed vision, but also had great courage to take root in China at that moment in time. The brand's success came not only from being one of the first luxury houses to enter the Chinese market, but also from its commitment to establishing huge brand awareness here.

‘There are simply too many malls and department stores in the United States and they all have similar offerings – supply is now far larger than demand.’

In what ways did Chinese consumers understand and then reinterpret the Western notion of ‘luxury’?
The word ‘luxury’ for many Westerners usually implies exquisite craftsmanship and superior quality. The modern-day concept of ‘luxury’ in China is somewhat different though. Whether it's lost in translation or the result of cultural differences, the notion of luxury is more about expensiveness, wastefulness and unnecessity. Many Chinese consumers have a very different understanding and appreciation of luxury goods. That's why I prefer to call this industry ‘high-end fashion’, which is more consistent with the connotations of luxury fashion in Europe. Take for instance the art world: some artworks are very expensive, but Chinese don't consider them luxury goods because an artwork is only precious for those who appreciate it; those who don't won't buy it, no matter what the price tag says. In my opinion, ready-to-wear clothing is fundamentally about necessity and self-expression; the image a person is trying to project to the world shows his or her inner pursuit. So we need to be careful about the misconception of the term luxury, which limits it to something unnecessary and wasteful, which is obviously far from the reality of consumer needs in the fashion industry.

Given China's population, how do you balance quantity and quality?
Quality is always the number-one standard for SKP. Our requirements for quality far exceed quantity. Only by maintaining quality growth can the business be everlasting. The thing our industry needs to be most vigilant about is lack of patience. Excessive pursuit of short-term performance will damage long-term development of the industry. It's hard for me to understand brands live-streaming fashion shows where customers can instantly buy items; it's unbelievable. In my opinion, if brands hold six big shows a year, no matter how talented the designers, they'll not be able to maintain their uniqueness and creativity for long. Running forward too fast will only make our industry lose its soul. Maintaining a proper balance between the pressure of commercial capital and fashion creativity is an art. It is also the foundation to ensuring that we create high-quality fashion value.

But isn't this at odds with the digital culture of immediacy?
Luxury fashion is not ‘fast-food’. For the price customers pay for your brand and products, they have to be buying the highest quality ideas, the highest quality products, the highest quality experience, and the highest quality service.

How do you introduce these high-quality values to younger customers?
There is no future without young customers and I consider SKP to be a high-quality enterprise with a democratic attitude towards consumption. I want to build an elegant environment of undifferentiated service. You can have something to drink, buy a book, meet friends or just hang out. In fact, many of our best customers began shopping at SKP by buying a lipstick or a cup of coffee. As their career progresses, so their shopping habits within SKP also evolve.

Part III
The founder's story

To what extent did your parents and family life impact your later life as an entrepreneur?
I grew up in a very ordinary Chinese family. My parents were kind, simple and compassionate, tolerant and equal, and attached importance to their children's education and the development of their personalities. My mother has excellent taste and intuition, being self-disciplined and frank. I think I inherited some of her qualities and they live on in the SKP ecosystem.

Were you a grade-A student or rebel?
I liked being an 80% student, rather than being straight A. The reason I didn't want the other 20% was that I still wished to have time for myself to read, hang out and play basketball. My talent was finding a balance between rebellion and academic excellence. Later, I realized my temperament was suited to pursuing freedom in my life, without attracting attention. If you were rebellious, people would want to get you into trouble; if you were the top student, you'd feel pressure from your peers. So the best tactic was to lower your ranking and allow yourself more free time and space. My personal wisdom is to avoid trouble or direct confrontation.

‘Financial figures are just the surface of the ocean; broader trends of social development influence the overall current; this is what determines real change’

Was university an option at that time?
It was only after Deng Xiaoping restored the college entrance examination system that I had the opportunity to attend university. Before that I was a farmer, I joined the army, and I worked in factories. These were all very precious experiences.

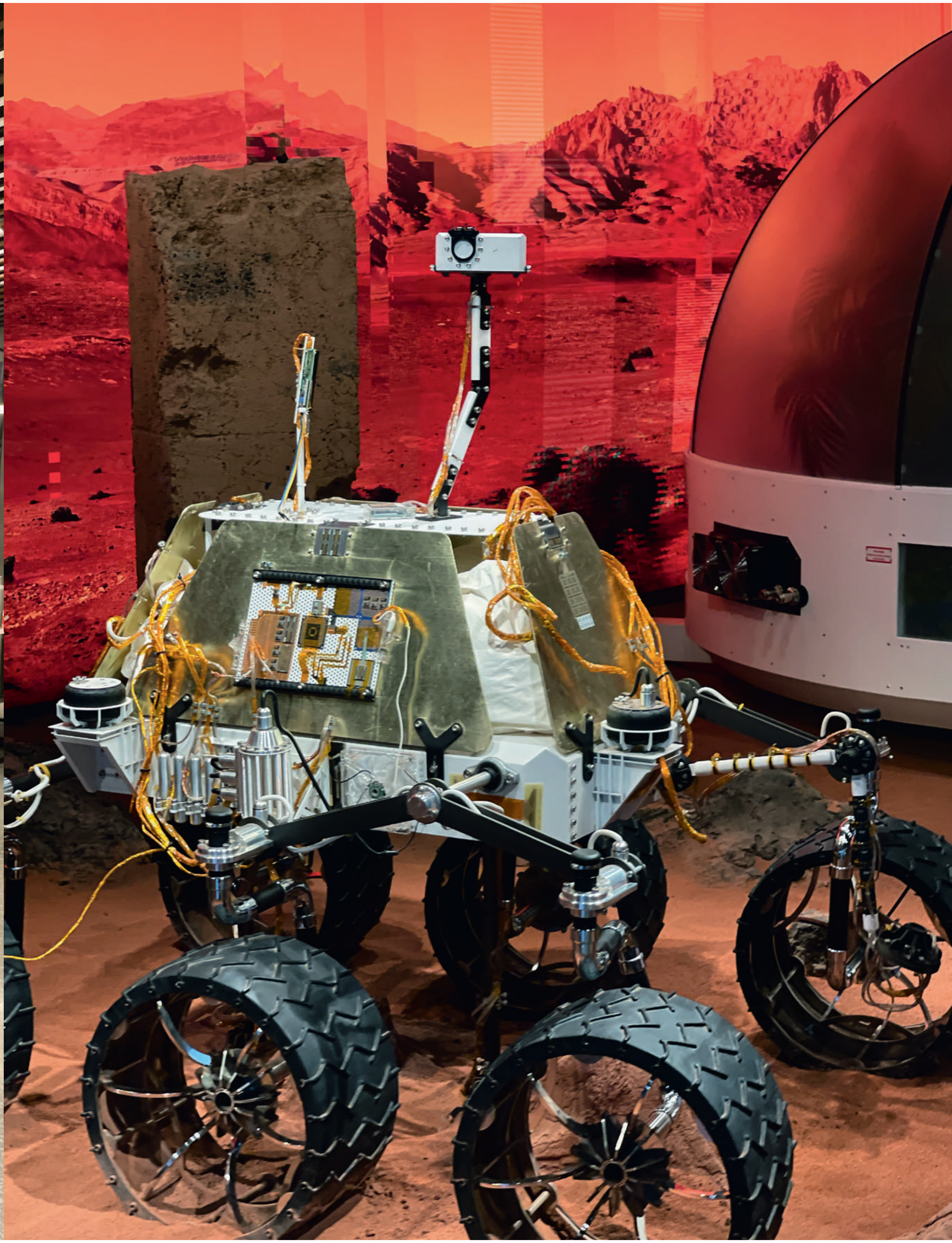
How did those experiences influence your vision and leadership of SKP?
The biggest takeaways were an understanding of human nature and society, and being grateful for what you experience. I decided in the early 1990s to found my own business, even though I had zero experience in operating and managing a company. I made many mistakes, but learned not to lose myself in them. As an entrepreneur, the most important thing is to have dreams and passions. You need to work hard and persevere. And you also need some good luck. I was lucky to be a Chinese person in the era of economic reform and the opening up of the country. When I was young, I had many dreams, but running a retail business was never one of them.

What dreams did you have?
When I was very young, I dreamt of being a scientist, a writer or a soldier – but I never wanted to be an entrepreneur.

What led you to pursue the unknown of entrepreneurialism?
Such a major life decision was not made on impulse, but through careful choices. Having the courage to get out of your comfort zone is the first step in starting a business. I didn't know how to do it, but everything can be learned, and I liked the fashion industry.

How has your own understanding of fashion developed over the years?
In my memory and in my personal view, the strength of your artistic sensibility determines your understanding of fashion. My generation went through a period when Chinese society was undergoing tremendous changes – from closed doors to opening up, from a centrally planned economy to the market system, from one single ideological education to multiple cultural perspectives, and from poverty to wealth. Witnessing the transition from the most poverty-stricken and arduous times to the most beautiful times, we've experienced a huge contrast. As a result, my understanding of Western fashion culture has changed with the times and environment. But the real leap in my understanding of fashion has been acquired through the practice of managing SKP.

Were you travelling internationally at this point, and if so were there retail businesses that inspired you?
I saw a lot in foreign countries and had a lot of inspiration. In the US, Walmart stores and Kmart hypermarkets were everywhere, and I was very impressed by Macy's and Saks Fifth Avenue. I looked up to those businesses and would ask myself how could someone grow such a large-scale business? The choices I made when starting the business were principally based on instinct. I might have entered the retail industry by accident, but I quickly discovered that I really liked it. So it's been what I've been doing ever since. Although the Chinese market has been full of all kinds of temptations and opportunities over the past decades, I'm the kind of person who likes to focus on one thing and do that thing as well as I can.



LOEWE
试用装
JUVENA
TESTER
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‘In 10 years’ time, ‘Made in China’ will be synonymous with high quality.’

Mr Ji and Patrizio Bertelli
in conversation, 12 March 2021.
Moderated by Jonathan Wingfield.

Jonathan Wingfield: Mr Bertelli, when did you first visit China, and to what extent did you sense the scale of commercial opportunity at the time?

Mr Bertelli: The first time was in 1993. I visited what was then called Canton, then Shanghai and Beijing. I remember the impressive sight of all the people riding their bicycles in Tiananmen Square. I was immensely curious, and my first impression of China was a feeling that this huge population was about to undergo a considerable change in their habits and their way of life. It was pretty clear that China would become the market it is today, once it started tackling the social differences within its huge population. At the time, few people had access to – I wouldn’t call it consumerism – but to all those goods that make life easier and more pleasurable: a house, a car, a TV, all those amenities that we are all used to.

Could you talk about bringing Prada into China? What conversations did you have to have with local Chinese partners to make this a reality?

Mr Bertelli: Working with partners like Mr Ji has been absolutely instrumental in making ourselves understood. He was one of the first people in the Chinese market who truly understood luxury. I remember the opening of SKP in Xi’an – the Terracotta Army city – and the party Mr Ji threw for the grand opening: it was a clear expression of how he could take our concept of luxury in Europe and successfully implement it in the Chinese market. He is not the only one, but he is the best embodiment of this attitude towards luxury. It’s not so much a question of consumerism; it’s more a new attitude and new way of living in a country that couldn’t possibly stay as it was in the 1980s. It is a clear symbol of change. Over the past 30 years, China has been like a sponge, absorbing everything that comes its way. They’ve made things like luxury, consumerism and technology their own – and will continue to do so.

Did you also envisage the potential desire, enthusiasm and respect that Chinese consumers would have for the notion of ‘Made in Italy’?

Mr Bertelli: Yes, I sensed that immediately, for the simple reason that what we call ‘Made in Italy’ is a reservoir of know-how and crafts and skills that are simply not available in other countries. It is like champagne being unique to a specific region in France. Made in Italy is made here; it is in our DNA.

Mr Ji, what were your earliest experiences of connecting with Western luxury fashion houses?

Mr Ji: Over the years I’ve had the privilege of meeting and becoming friends with the owners and CEOs of many of the luxury fashion department stores and brands, and I have learned a lot from them. I have specific memories of meeting Mr Bertelli for the first time: I remember being in his office and him telling me about the history of Prada, its present status, and his vision for the brand’s future. I clearly remember Mr Bertelli explaining that while Prada is an Italian brand, born in Italy, it is also an Asian brand. He told me about attending a conference in Florence in the 1980s at which the chairman of Sogo, the Japanese department store, was giving a speech, and being invited to visit Japan afterwards. He told me that everything about Prada today as an international brand stemmed from that visit to Japan.

Mr Bertelli: Do you remember I did a lot of drawings while you were there?

Mr Ji: Yes, I recall you drawing a chart, illustrating the fact that since 1991, Prada’s business growth has been amazing, and that its international growth also stemmed from that moment. You also told me that one day the Prada IPO would take place in Hong Kong.

Mr Bertelli: I have always told you everything, Mr Ji, including that the IPO would happen in Asia. Mr Ji is an excellent man; he is very strict and severe and demanding, but in good ways. Ultimately, Mr Ji, I want you to know that if Prada has the status it now enjoys in China, it is thanks to your work and your time.

Mr Ji: I am grateful that my interaction with Mr Bertelli has always been frank and to the point, because I have learned a lot from those conversations.

Mr Bertelli: Let me explain something about Mr Ji: his greatest gift is his perfect sense of timing. Although his process can be relatively slow, it is always carefully thought out and planned throughout. And he always reaches the objectives that he has in mind.

‘Mr Ji is like an elephant, and it’s much better to avoid a clash with him because you could get crushed if you go against him.’

Mr Bertelli, you say Mr Ji is strict and severe in a positive way. Could you give me an example of this in your business relationship?

Mr Bertelli: When he speaks about business, Mr Ji makes his own opinions and comments known. He might say, ‘Why don’t you do this or that? Why don’t you consider other options?’ But really, as soon as either of us suggests something, he expects it done. It is not necessarily a discussion; it is more like a proposal and I have to deliver what I’ve promised. He is like an elephant, and it’s much better to avoid a clash with him because you could get crushed if you go against him.

In what specific ways does Mr Ji represent a strategic partner for Prada in its rapport with the Chinese market?

Mr Bertelli: I don’t know how he does it – maybe it’s purely instinct – but he has such a profound understanding of the quality of Prada, and in particular an appreciation of when a product is just right. The other thing is his extraordinary ability to look ahead and foresee the future. That gives him the insight to find the best architect for his stores, to have the best product merchandisers, and so on. In this respect, he is not European at all.

What about pure business projections?

Mr Bertelli: It’s simple – the first rule for Mr Ji is to respect the brands. He is not about making quick easy cash; he doesn’t want to depreciate his capital or his assets. He doesn’t like to do end-of-season sales; he wouldn’t want to cheapen Prada like that. He protects the capital that he invests in major brands. He is the best defender of his market and our brands. Of course, he is not the only one: Isetan does the same in Japan, as does Lotte in Korea – and I don’t want to downplay the importance of other players in the Chinese market – but I have to say that SKP is the real champion in the Chinese market.

How do the differences between Western and Chinese consumers shape the ways Prada operates in China?

Mr Bertelli: It’s more relevant to look at generational rather than geographical differences. If you consider Gen Z, I don’t see much difference between Chinese and Europeans, whereas there is a vast difference between Chinese and European generations born in the 1960s and 1970s. For millennials and Gen Z, it is a more globally level playing field because people are using the same digital tools more or less. Chinese consumers were actually the first to adopt digital systems on a wide scale; they were even faster than the Japanese. Just think of payment systems: China is totally cashless now, even in the smallest market in a tiny town, you pay with your phone. In Italy, we are still far from that; it is still not that common to use a credit card, while paying with your phone is out of this world. Even the platforms in China are different and much more active and quicker. It is our job to get up to Chinese speed.

Mr Ji describes SKP-S as more visual feast than just a shopping experience. What do you think of this evolution of shopping as cultural experience?

Mr Bertelli: Mr Ji understood perfectly that he couldn’t just open boutiques. He had to present an entirely new concept, with restaurants, bars, spectacle and entertainment at the core. The key thing is that the *quality* of experience is always maintained. One thing I want to tell you, Mr Ji. I know you don’t particularly care for it, but you should open SKP in Shanghai. I tell you every time we meet, but you never listen to me.

Mr Ji: We have so many opportunities in China; it is not only about Shanghai.

Mr Bertelli: Come on, Mr Ji! Shanghai is a symbol, a name; it is the most international city you have, akin to Los Angeles or New York. It is a global city. So listen to Patrizio and open in Shanghai!

Mr Ji: I certainly don’t deny Shanghai’s market position, but we need to be patient and make the right decision instead of just expanding for the sake of expansion. China is not just Shanghai; there are many other beautiful cities.

Mr Bertelli, you’re being the elephant now.

Mr Ji: Now you have a proper insider discussion, Jonathan, not just an interview. You’ve got proposals coming from either side, just like the private meetings Mr Bertelli and I always have. In terms of SKP-S, Prada has without any doubt been the role model in all aspects. That is because Mr Bertelli truly understood the objectives of SKP-S; he understood the importance of connecting with the next generation of customers. So I must say this to Mr Bertelli: so many young customers instantly fell in love with the Prada store in SKP-S,

‘Even in the smallest market in a tiny Chinese town, you pay with your phone. Whereas in Italy, it is still not that common to use even a credit card.’

and not just with the product or with the visual merchandising. They loved *everything* in the store!

Mr Bertelli: I knew from the beginning that SKP-S would need to be a retail offering that would change three or four times a year, and that it would need to be a physical representation of what young customers see in the digital world. That is the core of the strategy – a physical experience and location that changes almost as frequently as a digital one.

Mr Ji: We rotate a few times each year, but it isn't just rotations for the sake of rotations; it is the stories, themes and message that you create while making those rotations. Some brands rotate their products and their physical space two or three times a year, but what they are offering actually leaves the customers underwhelmed and disappointed. Many of the creative directors in Europe ignore the fact that SKP-S is a very important platform, one they should really engage with more to create a deep connection with young Chinese customers.

‘All the Prada products we do for SKP are entirely exclusive; they’re not available anywhere else on the retail market or on e-commerce platforms.’

Mr Bertelli: The idea is that every time you have a rotation, you need to accompany it with something really special and unique.

Mr Ji: Some other brands just don’t have this clarity of vision.

Mr Bertelli: Having a vision means you need a lot of people to develop it, which is expensive, and lots of brands just play safe with their money.

Mr Bertelli, what about the challenge of keeping up with the pace and the requirements of SKP? How do you reconcile the time, expertise and resources required to deliver Prada quality with the sheer scale of the Chinese market?

Mr Bertelli: That’s really the heart of the matter. It’s certainly not easy, but I can try to explain how we proceed. We don’t rely on an external creative studio, so as soon as we start designing and creating our products, we know the problems we will have to solve. Nothing happens in isolation; everyone is involved with their skill sets and capacities from the very beginning. From an outsider’s perspective this might sound messy, but it is the only way to really come up to speed with the whole process. Inside Prada, there are maybe 50 different people across multiple departments perfectly aligned with what SKP-S means and what it requires – store furnishings, fixtures, products, photography, campaigns. We’re currently working on a beautiful SKP project for late April based on the idea of camping. I love the project; it is going to be very successful.

Mr Ji: I’ve seen it and I love it, too.

Mr Bertelli: The camping project will continue throughout the year and we’ll provide different products for each season. It is almost like a movie that will go on for eight months, chaotic but very interesting. We’re designing it like the script for a movie, changing things and rearranging them as we go along, and we will keep fine-tuning them throughout the duration of the project. We want to include some kind of ‘living pictures’, with real people interacting with the presentation. The effect we want is like when you walk past a film shoot.

Mr Bertelli, how do you feel about SKP’s strategy of focusing on physical retail, while not yet developing e-commerce? It feels almost counter-intuitive to modern life but has been one of the fundamental reasons of its success.

Mr Bertelli: That would be my choice and my attitude, too. The reality is that Mr Ji made this decision and the results are what we see; he is absolutely right. Of course, Mr Ji is always free to decide to increase his presence on e-commerce platforms at any given time in the future. All the products we do for SKP are exclusive; they’re not available anywhere else on the retail market or on e-commerce platforms. It is SKP’s own exclusive product.

Mr Ji, could you tell me a bit more about the strategy of exclusive products? How many brands provide exclusive products and what percentage of their overall stock is exclusive?

Mr Ji: It depends on each individual brand’s strategy, their own broader ambitions for the Chinese market, and their own judgements about SKP. Let’s continue to take Prada as an example: Mr Bertelli and the Prada company have clearly come to the conclusion that if you make that investment in SKP – with exclusive products and collections – you will get better returns. There are other brands that want to do similar things, although some may not have the skills, financial resources or infrastructure to achieve this level of ambition. What I can say with certainty is that no other company currently has 50 people with such a good understanding of how SKP works, and no other company has leadership as strong as that of Mr Bertelli. As Mr Bertelli said, it is not a question of isolated work – it requires an entire system.

Mr Bertelli: It takes leadership, yes. At Prada, we really want to be able to do things that no one else does; my wife, Miuccia Prada, and I both feel the same about this.

Mr Ji: Always embrace the dream. Without it, it would not have been possible.

Mr Bertelli: You are like my alter ego in China.

‘China will have to shed its identity as a big-volume producer and once it does that, it will become the owner of quality.’

How important is it for Prada’s creative leaders – Mrs Prada and Raf Simons – to visit somewhere like SKP? The tangible connection between creator and consumer feels increasingly important.

Mr Bertelli: The power of the brand is not sufficient; we firmly believe in direct contact. I have visited China countless times over the past 30 years. Miuccia was there back in the 1970s when it was practically closed; she travelled around by train for a month. Fashion designers who lock themselves in an ivory tower are just too far removed from reality. Of course, in the past year we have all been relying on digital communication, which is useful but not enough. It takes away so much personality from our connection to the world. You learn so much more by walking around a street market than by reading reports. Taking a train, walking around the streets, observing people, going to popular restaurants, that is how we learn.

You alluded to the pandemic. Let’s discuss the impact and changes that Covid has forced upon the fashion industry.

Mr Ji: We cannot underestimate the impact Covid-19 has had on the human race, not just fashion. For our industry in particular, any business dependent on travellers or tourists is experiencing a lot of challenges, so at SKP we have needed to focus more on the needs of local customers. We need to look into how to improve the offerings in each of our local markets, to enhance the customer experience. Any improvements in a store’s physical experience enhance brand perception and that should not be underestimated. Perhaps the most important thing is that the whole human race is in the same boat, so we have to be united. There needs to be more communication, more understanding, and more mutual respect and trust. That’s the only way to meet the challenges of the future. SKP has to create closer connections, more collaborations, and a deeper sense of partnership with brands. These things will enable us to overcome future difficulties.

Mr Bertelli: The global pandemic has highlighted two fundamental things, at least as far as Europe is concerned. In our industry, brands cannot thrive by just selling to Asian tourists in Europe; we also need to focus on our own local customers in Europe and Mr Ji has said the same thing needs to happen in China. I agree that we need to be absolutely respectful of each other, not make any distinctions between different countries, and respect the Chinese market. When the pandemic closed the border Chinese customers had to shop far more at home. In this past year Chinese consumers have understood, I’m sure, that they can buy all brands in China, perhaps better than in Europe. The European market may not go back to the same volumes as pre-pandemic, that is not certain. We will need to evolve in terms of products, identity, communication. We need to follow the cultural changes in countries and new generations. Chinese 20-year-olds today are totally different to Chinese 20-year-olds from two or three decades ago; these customers today are totally aware of our products and our market. We need to work in sync with the countries where we operate and the customers we serve. In the past, it made sense to have the same product everywhere in the world, but the big growth areas have been in tropical areas, equatorial areas, where temperatures are totally different to the markets we used to serve. Look at the climatic differences between Beijing and Hong Kong. We have to cater for different climatic and physical needs, and not just cultural differences, with products that have to convey the brand’s identity. Sometimes clients are criticized for being too demanding, but they know their products; they’re demanding for a reason. What really changed the market was the iPhone and the iPad hitting the market in 2009 and 2010; that brought about a huge change in our habits. Our approach to the market has had to change radically, not only with the products, but also with the way we present them on the market.

How do you envisage the evolution of the Chinese market, and what effects will this have on global fashion?

Mr Ji: The next decade in China is going to be key, because it is the first decade in the next stage of China's economic development. We just finished the parliamentary sessions today in China, which created a five-year plan of national economic development focused on developing quality. The fashion industry in my opinion will grow at least three-fold in the next decade. More and more young people will embrace the industry. We need to create products, systems and structures that win the respect of these new generations. The demand for and the needs of the fashion industry in China are going to be huge, and the market will become more and more challenging. Like Mr Bertelli just said, Chinese 20-year-olds are so much more knowledgeable than 20-year-olds in China 30 years ago. They are far more demanding, and will make their own decisions about which brands they'll continue to embrace and which they'll abandon. They will make their own decision about which department stores they want to go to and which ones they will ignore. So the whole industry will become even more fiercely competitive. In the next decade, leading brands will become stronger, while the brands at the bottom will find it increasingly difficult. We have to set the bar really high for ourselves. We need to be agile and more flexible and active in terms of innovations. We have to do all of this in order to embrace the future.

Mr Bertelli: I agree entirely with Mr Ji. I was reflecting on the complexity of the market; it is going to become really selective and demanding. I am comfortable with that situation. I am 75 years old; I am not sure I will live until I am 85. I will leave the responsibility of guiding my son on this journey in the hands of Mr Ji.

Mr Ji, you just mentioned the parliamentary discussions about quality. We talked earlier about the value of the 'Made in Italy' label; do you think in the future that the 'Made in China' label could become a leading global symbol of quality?

Mr Ji: Producing a high-quality product is not the same as creating a high-quality brand. This is quite a delicate situation in the fashion industry. The creativity in a brand involves much more than just production and manufacturing. In China, building a world-famous brand requires guidance from the international brands.

> **'The Chinese fashion industry will grow at least three-fold in the next decade. We need to create products that win the respect of new generations.'**

Mr Bertelli: I think Mr Ji is being overly cautious. Let me take an example. In 1960, the Japanese started working in the camera industry; Olympus, Nikon, Canon, everyone started making cameras. When I was a boy, I remember people said that Japanese cameras were not top quality; we were used to buying German or Swiss brands, the same for hi-fi audio. Now we take it for granted that top-quality cameras and hi-fi come from Japan. As far as technology is concerned, China is following in the same footsteps as Japan a few decades ago. Think of Volvo, which is now owned by a Chinese company and has made progress in quality. Its newest cars are just fantastic, especially the electric ones. China will have to shed its identity as a big-volume producer and once it does that, it will become the owner of quality. The same goes for hi-tech: in 10 years' time, 'Made in China' will be a label synonymous with high quality. I am sure you agree with me.

Mr Ji: Yes, the development of higher quality is inevitable in China. We have to use as few resources as possible to create as much value as possible. High-quality manufacturing is not simply a question of products; it is also about protecting the environment. That is now a very clear government objective: we want to push economic development, but we should not sacrifice the environment in this pursuit. It is, of course, a very difficult task to accomplish. The term 'high-quality development' sets a high bar. We need to change people's mentality; they need better schooling, better housing, a more dignified life. To create future infrastructure for the luxury fashion industry in China, we will need an excellent creative education system, with good role models who can pass on their expertise and knowledge. All these aspects are included in the so-called high-quality development, as is our service sector, and the retail industry, online and offline. Better experience, better offerings, better service are all essential elements. The future will see us become more integrated into the rest of the world; more Europeans might start coming to China to create brands. It will be very interesting over the next decade. If you were 30 years younger Mr Bertelli, you would probably have already come to China to start your business.

Mr Bertelli: *Twenty* years younger! Actually, if someone could guarantee that I would be as fit as I am now when I am at least 80, then I would come over and start my local business right now! I'd need a good partner though.

Given China's economic and social development of the last 30 years, are you surprised not to see more Chinese luxury brands emerging?

Mr Bertelli: Yes, I've often thought about this, but I can't give you a sensible answer. Mr Ji should answer this.

Mr Ji: I think this is a problem we come across in the process of knowledge accumulation. I firmly believe that China will produce a number of internationally recognized brands in the future, but it just won't happen in the short term. It will take time. Secondly, the overall luxury fashion industry infrastructure in China is not sophisticated: we need more creatives, patternmakers, an entire support system. This system is well established in other industries in China, but for the fashion industry, the infrastructure is not yet in place. We need time to develop this. Regardless of the sector, you need to achieve global status to be a great brand. Prada is such a great brand loved by so many different customers in so many different regions and countries: Europeans and Asians, and Americans, too. It is about your creativity and your dedication to quality and the details in the craftsmanship. There is also, of course, the brand marketing. You need all of that in place to become a brand that has international prestige.

> **'If you were 30 years younger Mr Bertelli, you would probably have already come to China to start your business.'**

Could you imagine a time when a successful new global brand emerges that has no specific geographic or cultural provenance? Where location is no longer significant to success?

Mr Bertelli: It is highly unlikely to be a new brand, but Prada and other brands are looking at the global market. I agree with Mr Ji that we are understood globally, and not just in terms of luxury, but also in what we want to communicate. We communicate through products, as well as through lifestyle and the concepts we hold dear, such as art, the art foundation, the America's Cup; everything we do. Prada is definitely trying to enhance the brand itself without necessarily always thinking we come from Italy. This is what we are trying to do, and it takes time for a big organization to do that.

Mr Bertelli, do you think there is an opportunity for Italian brands to transfer 'Made in Italy' skills at scale to somewhere like China? Can those skills be transferred out of their original context?

Mr Bertelli: I think that we could do it and we will *have* to do it. We shouldn't be afraid of this or hold back. It is part of this overall global integration that we all require. We mustn't consider people as opponents; we have to let globalization play out and eventually it will turn out to be positive for all.

Finally, Mr Bertelli, what have you learned from Mr Ji and SKP?

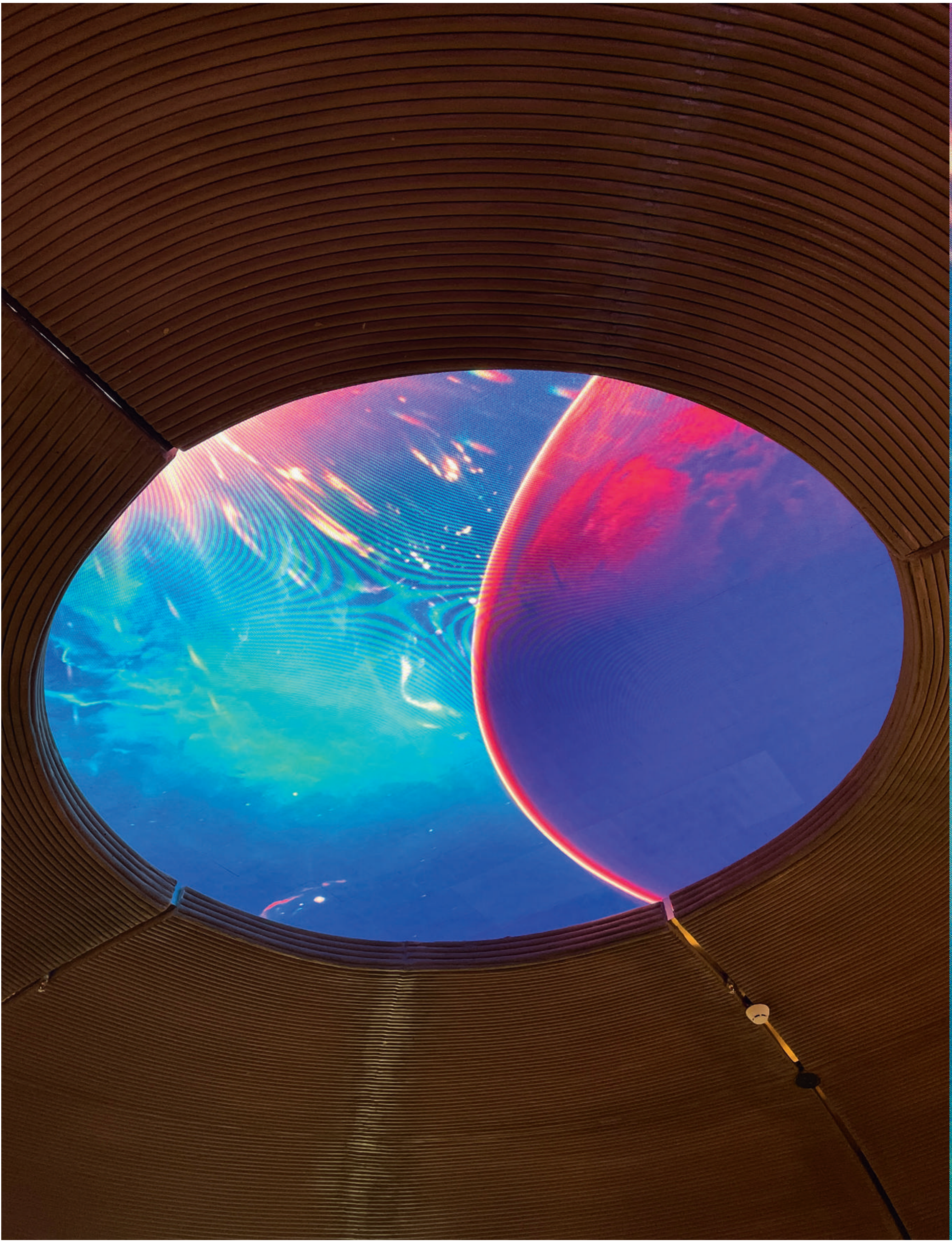
Mr Bertelli: First of all, and this has always been in my nature, is respect. I apply that to how we work together in a very open way without any double crossing or trickery. I trust Mr Ji personally a lot. It is very simple.

And Mr Ji, what have you learned from Mr Bertelli and Prada?

Mr Ji: Cultural respect, sufficient sharing and frank communication. More specifically, I've gained great insight into brands and the luxury industry from Mr Bertelli. I've learned how to lead and to manage a luxury brand. And in particular, I've learned to value the right attitude about details and product quality. Every time we meet, I learn so much. I know that we belong to the so-called older generation, but we need to keep challenging one another so we maintain our passion for our respective work. So many times Mr Bertelli has complained about the slow speed of my decision making, but every time we have achieved the shared target.

Mr Bertelli: No, you are not slow! You just reflect on things, and that is different. That is why I said you are like an elephant – but an elephant has a huge brain! I should add that I started my career aged 18, and I have learned a lot from many people. My advice would be to try and look for as many Mr Ji's in your life as possible. I have been lucky to have had several along my career. My first partnership in Japan in the 1980s was with a distribution company called Miami, whose CEO, Kiichiro Funai, was very helpful. When I said I would like to start my own business in Japan, he had nothing against it and actually helped me. I can compare Mr Ji to the past CEO of Isetan in Japan; he was a dear friend. You need to look for the right partners, and most importantly, you have to be willing to listen to them.

Mr Ji: Thank you for your time and for your kind words.



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'You get to know your customer in real life, not through a spreadsheet.'

Mr Ji and Jonathan Anderson in conversation, 19 February 2021. Moderated by Jonathan Wingfield.

Jonathan Wingfield: Jonathan, you spent time in Beijing with Mr Ji at SKP, just prior to the pandemic. Tell me about that experience.

Jonathan Anderson: I was lucky enough to visit the new SKP-S store before it had opened or anyone had seen it. It was like entering a different planet! I'll never forget walking in with Mr Ji and seeing a flock of robotic sheep that looked like they had landed on Mars, and then going upstairs to a restaurant where you could eat the cutlery. It was a whole shopping experience that I'd never previously had, and incredibly bizarre. I remember when I first moved to London, Dover Street Market had just opened and that was a thing, but this was like a whole other level, like going into a completely abstract place, which I thought was so interesting.

'I was keen to do this interview because I believe the creative dialogue with China is currently the most important aspect of the industry.'

What did that experience tell you about the type of customer that SKP-S looks to appeal to and engage with?

Jonathan: Mr Ji has put shopping at the forefront of experience. Where in the West we have previously explored the idea of conceptual shopping, this takes it into the art of the spectacular. It's like going to see an attraction. It is incredibly new, in terms of what is happening in Asia. It's the first truly conceptual department store.

Mr Ji, with SKP and SKP-S, did you want to take the retail experience to a level where the customer is in an immersive space that is a feast for all the senses?

Mr Ji: Street fashion has developed rapidly over the past seven or eight years and brands have shown a strong sense of courageous rebellion; they've wanted to be different and to express themselves in a different language. That attracted more and more attention from younger customers, who are willing to pay relatively high prices for these different products. While we wanted to be consistent in terms of SKP-S's conditions and standards, we also wanted to create an environment in which street fashion could be sold alongside 'classic' luxury brands. The purpose of the visual universe we created in SKP-S was designed to create this mix of street fashion and luxury. We wanted to create an exceptional space where younger customers could socialize with each other, but we also wanted to create an environment in which creative leaders such as Jonathan [Anderson] could really express their talents.

SKP-S has been open for just over a year and our customers have proven to be really interested in the store's visual impact. More importantly, though, they are even more interested in the products on offer in this setting. For example, the limited-edition Air Jordan sneakers that we put on show each week have attracted lots of interest and attention from young customers. Also, the ski collection from Prada – that actually changed younger customers' perceptions of Prada as a brand. For a designer like you, Jonathan, in the SKP-S environment, there's an opportunity for you to push your product range and the way you present it in even more daring ways. Pascale [Lepoivre, Loewe CEO] should give you more budget for that!

Mr Ji, when you say you want brands to push their product range, do you mean stylistically becoming more daring, or are you referring to the frequency of drops, the overall amount of stock available, or the aesthetics of their presentations?

Mr Ji: All of this. In spite of the global pandemic, the Prada and Louis Vuitton stores in SKP-S are already in their fourth collection rotation in the past 12 months; Gucci is in its third. Really that is our principal goal for SKP-S: we want the brands and creative directors to use their spaces to make ever more daring attempts to break through *all* the traditional boundaries; to make even more creations, to show them in adventurous new ways, with a high frequency of change.

Jonathan, is it surprising to hear the chairman of one of the world's leading department stores say, 'I'm daring you to create collections and spaces and experiences that completely transcend the things we've previously known to generate success'?

Jonathan: It is incredibly rare. We are talking about taking conceptual risks with products, as much as with the space and environment in which they're being sold – that's what makes it so unusual. We have done several things at SKP and SKP-S that have been incredibly successful and which would probably have been less successful in a more traditional department-store setting. For example, for Loewe, we have a lot of artworks and objects in the space, which is different to our other stores in China. It's a daunting process for a creative director, but so fulfilling because your vision isn't being diluted.

Does that happen often?

Jonathan: Mr Ji knows this only too well, but in malls, there is this scenario whereby mega-brands are fighting over small square meterage. What is interesting at SKP is that no matter how big or small you are, if the product is not interesting or dynamic enough, it doesn't get air time. That encourages brands to look outside their comfort zone. I agree with Mr Ji about the Prada concept in the store – it has really made the idea of Prada feel new again.

'Western brands dictated what Chinese consumers wanted, whereas now those same consumers tell *us* what they want. The power has completely shifted.'

This clearly represents a new era of fashion retail based upon attention-grabbing and spectacle-based fashion and its presentation to the world. For better or worse, is this going to define fashion more broadly in the next few years? Do you think that brands that don't fit that spectacle-based way of presentation will inevitably suffer?

Jonathan: There are many things at play as we go forward; if we'd been discussing this a year ago I would have probably answered slightly differently. Globally, the pandemic is naturally going to speed up the decline of uninteresting things. And quiet or low-key could start to be considered almost irrelevant. Fashion had already hit a wall before the pandemic, in terms of the media, department stores, and how it was consumed globally. In the West, we have to battle to understand better that Chinese consumerism is growing at a far faster rate than in the West. While we may still have the brands, we are no longer the leaders in terms of retail consumption. I was keen to do this interview because I believe this need to understand the creative dialogue with China and the critiques we get from there is currently the most important aspect of the industry. Ultimately, the country's shoppers represent our key consumers. Ten to fifteen years ago, it would probably have still been America, but we are moving into a period of shifting consumer geopolitics. The designer, CEO and shareholders are now listening to and having a creative dialogue with Chinese consumers. In earlier periods, we dictated what they wanted, whereas now Chinese consumers are telling *us* what they want. This is clearly going to initiate a fascinating moment for fashion in general. The power has shifted.

What are your own thoughts about Chinese culture?

Jonathan: I have a huge admiration for it. I collect ceramics and historically, Chinese ceramics, for example, are probably the most cutting-edge that ever existed, far ahead of anything in the West. They invented and the West just copied. I think we are heading into a period where the West now looks to Asia in terms of its consumers. And what is happening in Chinese consumerism will start to be implemented in Europe, and all across the West. Everything is shifting, and that's exciting.

In what ways is this consumer-led dynamic influencing your work as a creative director, and is that even a healthy thing?

Jonathan: We have to be honest with ourselves: fashion is an art form, but one entirely driven by consumerism. As a designer, you have to listen, because this is the modern world; this is where we are. To be oblivious to the shift would be completely ignorant, and would make no creative or business sense. What I enjoy with Mr Ji is that it is a creative dialogue as much as a business dialogue. It is a give and take, not one-sided. When I was in China just before the pandemic, I loved travelling into the countryside and seeing people making things. It's so different to London or Paris, you have to be there to understand it. You cannot preach to people in China and then not go and see the people and cultures of that market first-hand. This is my thing with fashion in general. You cannot say, 'Oh, I'm going to sell to China, but I'm not going to engage with the culture.' No matter if it's people who make lanterns or make basketwork, you have to engage with the culture to understand, and this is where I think you have so much scope with creativity.

What do you see as the future of this relationship between Western brands and China?

Jonathan: I was recently watching the amazing Adam Curtis documentary called *Can't Get You Out of My Head*. In it, you see the evolving relationship between the East and the West and how we have got to the current moment. After seeing SKP-S and studying the marketplace in China, I really felt that the consumer had changed, particularly compared to when I was there 10 years ago. The business leaders have changed; the dialogue has changed. There was always an appetite for the history of fashion, the storytelling, what that could be, but when I returned in December [2019], I was surprised at how much further things had evolved in terms of the arts scene, young collectors, department stores, designers. Going back to the Adam Curtis documentary, what is interesting in this moment is that all the landmarks that designers and department stores had are crashing down, so no matter what happens as we come out of this situation, we have to decide as consumers and as people what we want from things. What future do we want? What was happening before is not working any more – which is inspiring, because how do we stimulate a new type of consumer? It involves more information, more tactility, and more spectacle. You just cannot ignore spectacle because the generation we are starting to sell to has grown up on that. Video games are more complex than ever before; they now feel like films in which you're the lead protagonist; cinema itself has evolved significantly, as has art. So it's no surprise that the way we shop has also evolved.

‘The pandemic is naturally going to speed up the decline of uninteresting things. And quiet or low-key could start to be considered almost irrelevant.’

How do you think people are going to react in the short term?

Jonathan: I think we are going to experience a post-pandemic boom of people grabbing onto things, and of going out into the world and exploring. People really don't want to be at home any more. The first thing that I personally want to experience is global travel; I want to go and see things I have never seen before. When I look back at being with Mr Ji in SKP-S, it was like seeing a snapshot of a new form of shopping. What I like about Mr Ji is that even though he is a very powerful figure in Chinese fashion, he has a genuine love of creativity. That is rare because it can so often be a dialogue only about numbers. Mr Ji is looking at the numbers and realizing that creativity is what is driving diversity within fashion.

Why is that so rare?

Jonathan: Because a lot of businesses are ultimately driven by the bottom line while lacking creativity at the top. Everyone can and *should* be creative in business. It's about having the right leaders who can see how to make money through creativity, rather than making money and then thinking about creativity.

Mr Ji, you've been listening to what Jonathan has been saying about this global shift towards the Chinese customer. What are your own thoughts?

Mr Ji: China has been experiencing extremely rapid changes over the past four decades. And because of this, Chinese consumers, enterprises, and also the government have a special love for innovation. Our consumers have traditionally been regarded as being conservative, but the reality is that they are highly determined not only to try new things, but also to try to initiate change themselves. This strong desire for change and for innovation has already been expressed over the past decade. Everything we have been doing in SKP has been driven by the needs or convictions of customers; we feel that we constantly have to change. The impact of the pandemic will mean that many Western brands will need to adopt a different mentality. Before Covid, some of them tended to have a certain kind of arrogance towards particular groups of customers. That kind of behaviour now has to stop, for the sake of those brands' business. They shouldn't just try and please certain groups of consumers – whether that's Chinese, Japanese or American – but rather show adequate respect to all consumers and all markets. What I admire most about Jonathan, besides his creative talent, is his strong and genuine curiosity to learn about different cultures, his willingness to listen and get to know his customers.

What can you say about Chinese consumers that might surprise Western readers?

Mr Ji: They're a lovely bunch of people, certainly SKP's customers! If you're willing to put a little dedication into creating something for them, they will reward you with their generosity – through their spending.

Jonathan, what have you understood about Chinese consumers' behaviour, particularly the younger generations', that simply isn't understood by those outside the country?

Jonathan: Their amazing humbleness and humour; the same goes for Mr Ji. He brings a lightness and sense of fun to the idea of selling and getting to know the customer, as well as doing things outside your comfort zone. I did a pop-up for my own brand with SKP in November 2019 and it was really fun. I had never seen so many people; it was a completely different experience. By getting to meet the consumer in real life, not on a spreadsheet, you start to understand how to engage with them better. When I first met Mr Ji, he encouraged me to accompany him around the mall, to see it and go in the different stores. It was fascinating and rare to walk with someone who enjoys seeing people interact with products so much. I just don't have that kind of relationship with other department stores; I don't walk through Selfridges with [group managing director] Anne Pitcher; it's a very detached relationship. Whereas I know that I could ring Mr Ji if I had an important question and he would help out. Similarly, when Pascale or Sidney [Toledano, CEO of LVMH Fashion Group] need something, Mr Ji is there.

‘There is a willingness in the Chinese consumer to question and to be ruthlessly critical, because they want brands that lead, not brands that follow.’

How do you feel about Mr Ji's comments about the arrogance of certain brands?

Jonathan: You cannot approach this with arrogance. Once you eliminate that, then anything can be successful. That is what I love about China: it doesn't matter if you are the biggest or smallest brand, anything is possible. What I have learned over the past seven years working at Loewe, which is a bigger brand than my own, is that you cannot underestimate the gravitas and excitement of the Chinese consumer. The thirst for knowledge about fashion, about the making and the craft, especially in younger people, is phenomenal; they know way more sometimes than I do. In the West, we just don't have that level of curiosity.

Why do you think that is?

Jonathan: I think that at some point in the West, the idea of luxury lost some of its appeal. Whereas when you look at the Chinese consumer, particularly the younger generation, they want to know where things are made, their intrinsic value, if they are historical or cutting edge; they want to understand the presentation. Above all, there is a willingness to question and to be ruthlessly critical, because the Chinese consumer wants brands that lead, not brands that follow. We *used* to be like that in the West, but seem to have moved on now. We might see a resurgence of it post-pandemic.

Jonathan, right at the beginning of your career, you worked in retail stores. What insight did that experience give you in terms of customer relations, merchandising and selling?

Jonathan: I first worked in the menswear department at Brown Thomas, a store in Dublin, and I also worked at Selfridges briefly. Then I met Manuela Pavesi, who was visual communications director for windows at Prada, and I began doing visual merchandising with her. The fundamental thing you learn when you are working in a store is that the design process is one thing, but the selling process is an entirely different one – and one that it is really difficult. When I was at Prada, we were creating windows and I learned about this idea that to be able to anchor the clothing six months after a show, you always needed to orchestrate a creative drama, like a stage set. By going through the process of working on a shop floor or doing visuals, I always keep in mind when I am designing that the process takes an entire year, from the beginning to the launch. It's like a circle with overlapping circles of pre-collections and then Christmas. When I am designing or in particular editing a collection, I like to think of how to merchandise the collection, like building a rack of clothes and constructing how it could actually exist in a wardrobe. My shop-floor experience has had a massive impact on me in terms of how I build up a collection.

In terms of merchandising a collection and building racks, are the ancillary worlds that brands create for their products increasingly important? Is it changing the way the clothes themselves are being designed?

Jonathan: Absolutely. The space has become paramount. Ultimately, if there is no sense of context, of setting, of environment, then the clothing very quickly becomes nothing. You have to ask yourself, what are we trying to sell, what are we trying to say? And the answers have to come from a creative space. Of course, online shopping is increasing, but when you are looking to sell a brand message, you need to know exactly what the door handle or the hanger is going to look like, or how the salesperson will put themselves across. These things add to the creative energy. It's also about tactility. Humans have understood the concept of stores since time immemorial. People have always wanted to sell and trade things through a tactile approach. It's just as much about selling a service. The personal engagement with someone, with being able to touch things, will never go away. It may decrease in terms of volume, but then the players left in the physical shopping market will ultimately become more powerful.

Mr Ji, what is it about Jonathan's work – both his designs and his overall creative direction – that connects with your customers?
Mr Ji: Loewe has been one of the best performing brands in terms of growth for SKP over the past few years. Our customers have become increasingly knowledgeable about the brand, and have subsequently fallen more in love with it for both men and women. Women's ready-to-wear and accessories are becoming more and more elegant in terms of both design and creativity. A very important point in Jonathan's creation is that all his designs are in touch with his customers.

How do you think the post-Covid era will affect the rapport between brand, retail space and customer?
Mr Ji: More and more customers will buy in their home cities, so any brand or any business overdependent on travellers or tourists will be in trouble. At SKP, we really want to see our customers in person, in the stores, engaging with the space. For customer-relationship management at SKP, this is the key: we want to see a real person; we want our customers to be real people. Hopefully, in the future, Jonathan, you will find more time to have real interactions with customers, and I'm sure that would be helpful to your design. Rely on the numbers in a spreadsheet and you'll be blinded by figures. But my feeling is that Loewe the brand will experience even bigger growth in SKP in the future.

Which product categories perform best, regardless of brand, at SKP?
Mr Ji: Of course, many of the brands want to do leather goods or handbags because it can increase sales and there are higher margins. At SKP, we actually love apparel, though; we love ready-to-wear even more, because ready-to-wear can create an even closer connection with our customers. Ultimately, creativity is the soul of the fashion business; passion also plays a big part in this industry – and you sense these things in Jonathan. I look forward to the resumption of global travel, so we can have you back in China again soon, Jonathan.
Jonathan: Just as soon as I am allowed back into the country, I will be there!

First photography assistant: Tom Ortiz. Photography assistant in Beijing: Jiabin Shen. Beijing production: Adam Chen, Emma Zheng. Post-production: Catalin Plesa @ quickfixretouch.
Special thanks to Jan Kennedy and everyone at Kennedy, London.

The looks of the season.

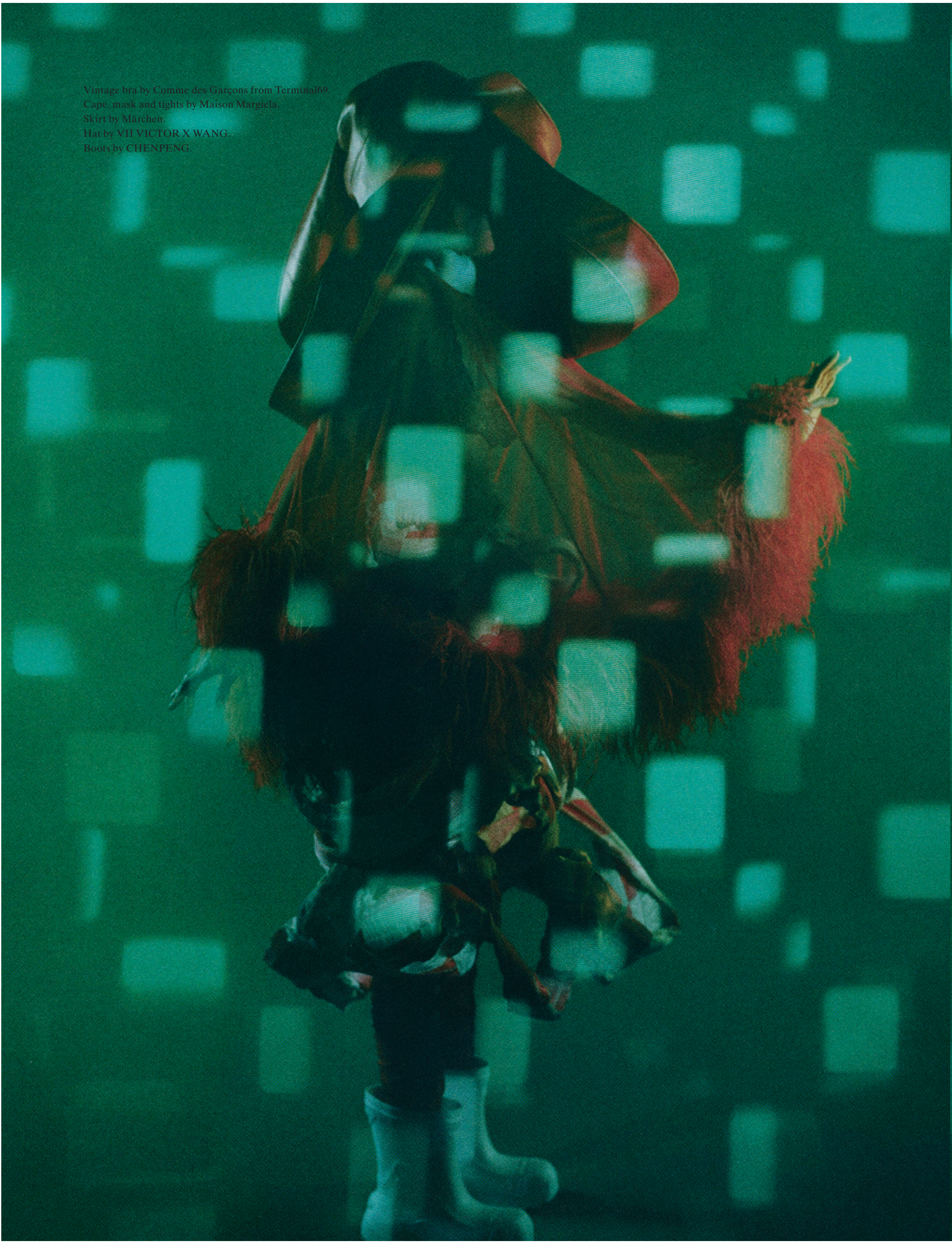
A convergence of styles, brands and exclusive products selected from SKP Beijing and SKP-S.

Photographs by Leslie Zhang
Styling by Lucia Liu

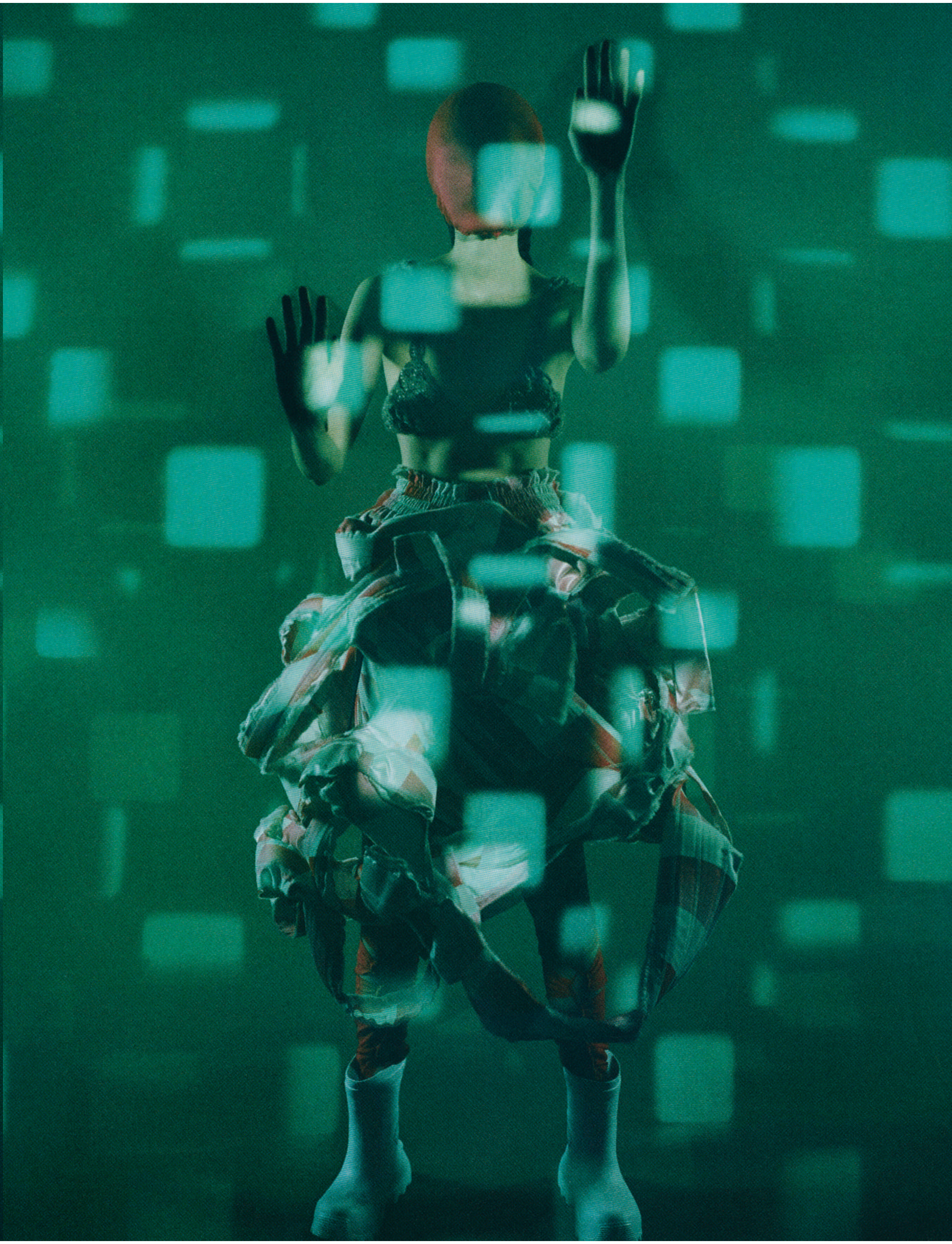
Dress by VII VICTOR X WANG.
Earrings by Xu Zhi.

Vintage top by Junya Watanabe from Terminal69.
Vest by momonary.
Long dress by pushBUTTON.
Sleeves by CHENPENG.
Hat by Kenzo.

Jacket and trousers by Stone Island,
exclusively for SKP-S.
Shirt by Susan Fang.
Black trousers by CHENPENG.
Mask and belt by Chanel.
Shoes by Givenchy.

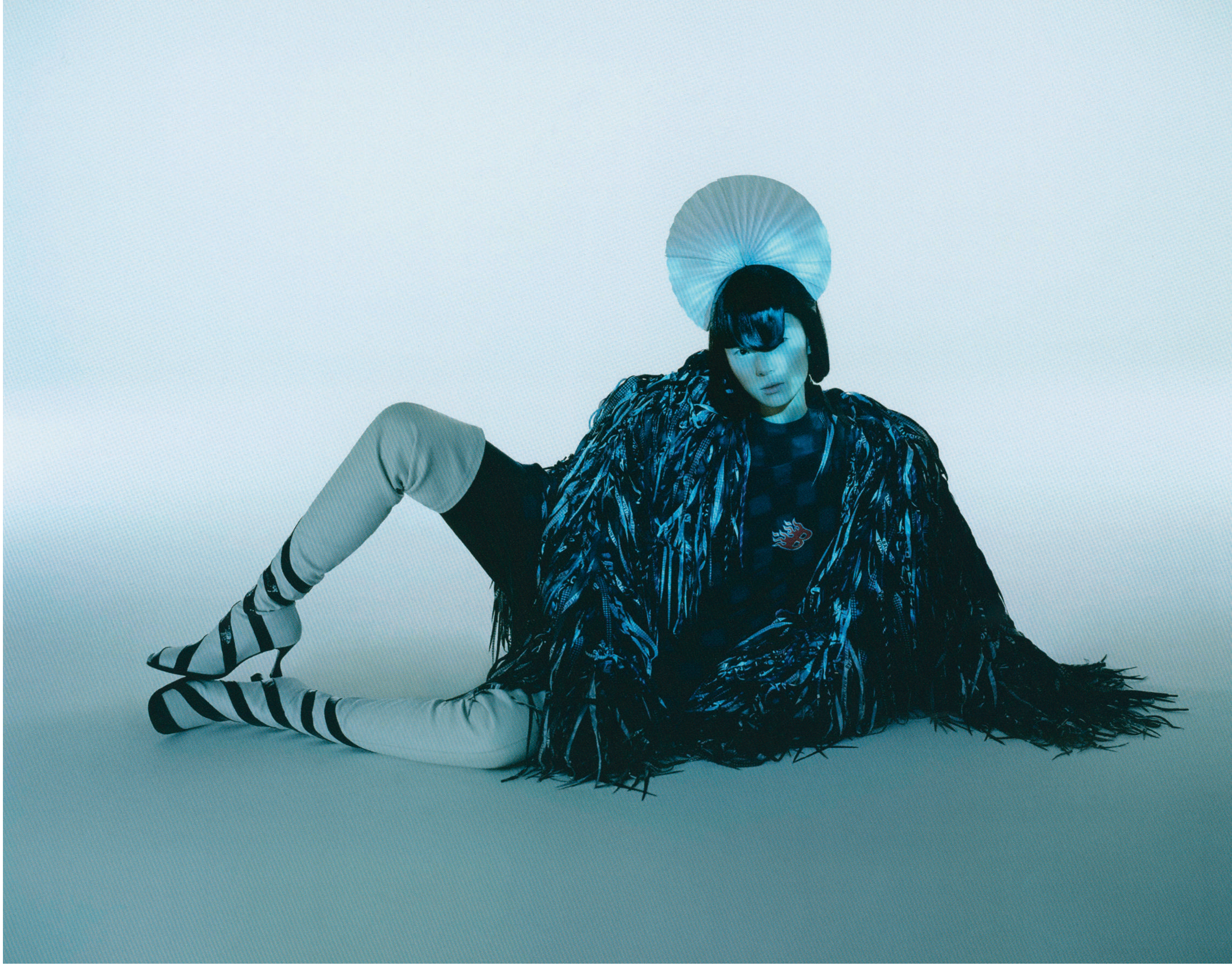


Vintage bra by Comme des Garçons from Terminal69.
Cape, mask and tights by Maison Margiela.
Skirt by Märchen.
Hat by VII VICTOR X WANG.
Boots by CHENPENG.



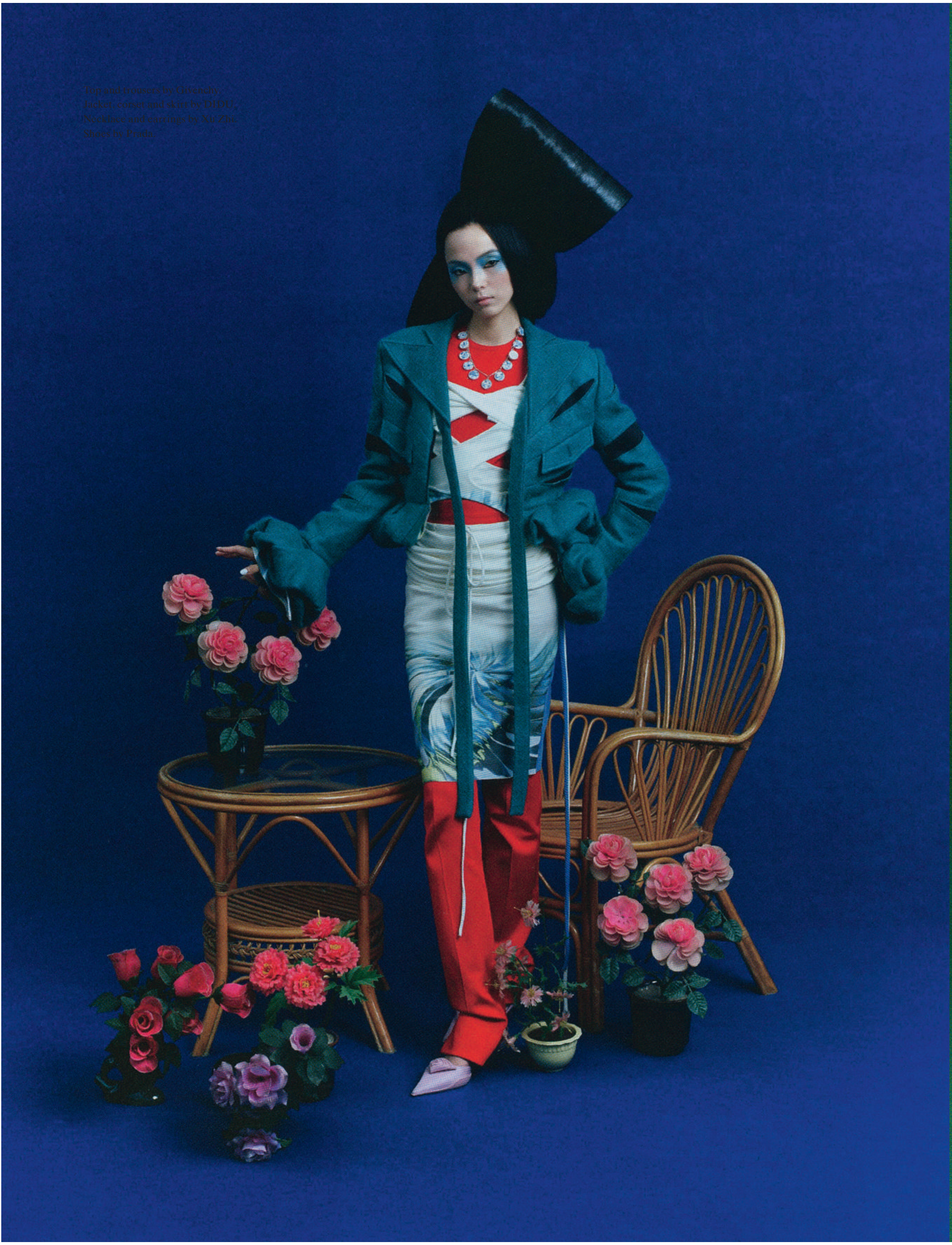
Shirt by Philosophy di Lorenzo Serafini.
Cardigan, shawl, trousers and
brooch by Louis Shengtao Chen.
Earrings by Pronounce.
Bag by Yueqi Qi.
Shoes by DIDU.

Dress and platform shoes by Noir Kei Ninomiya.

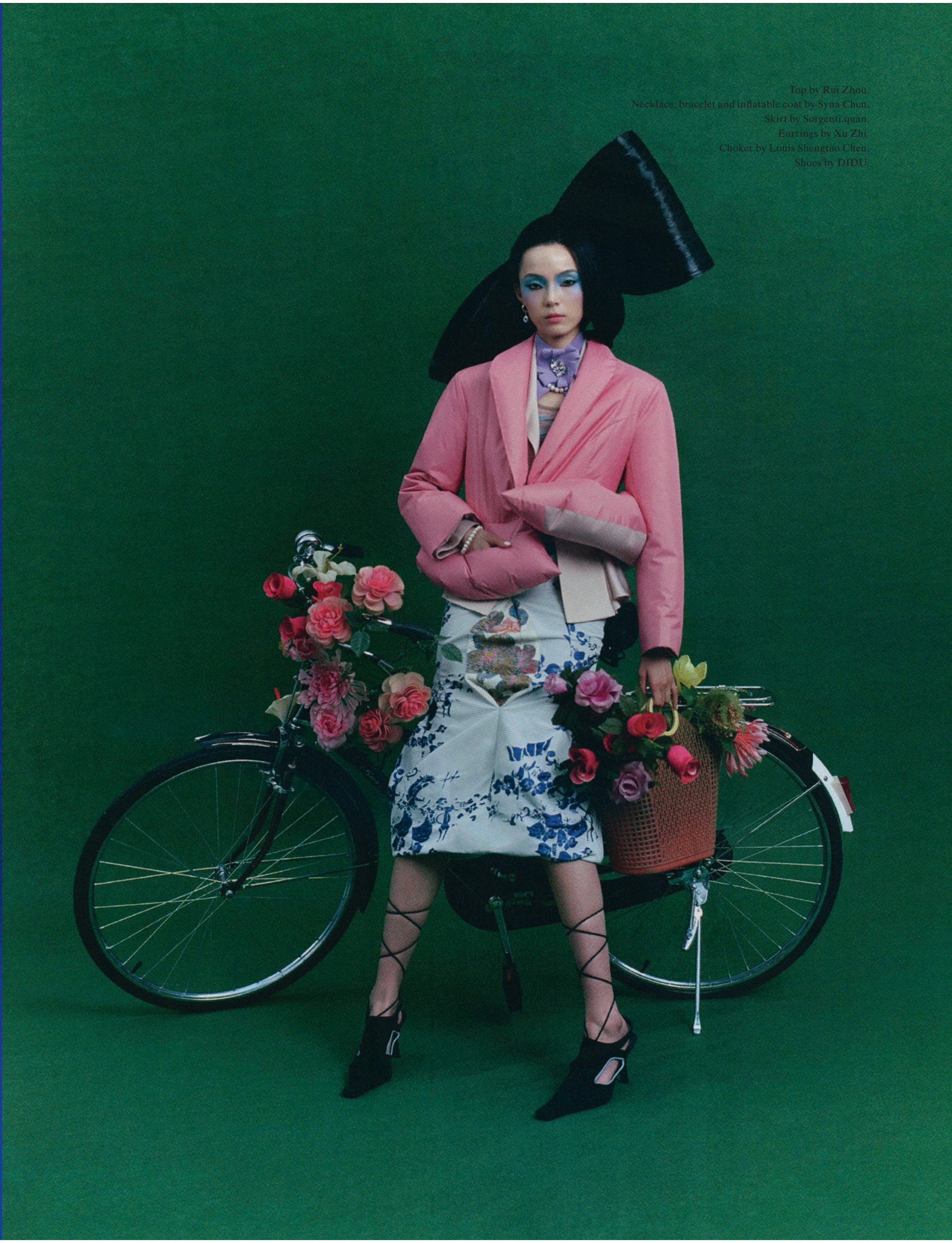


T-shirt, coat and trousers by Balenciaga.
Boots by Louis Shengtao Chen.

Dress by Bottega Veneta.
Embellished dress by Shie Lyu.
Inflatable coat by feyfey worldwide.
Tights by Maison Margiela.
Shoes by Salvatore Ferragamo.



Top and trousers by Givenchy.
Jacket, corset and skirt by DIDU.
Necklace and earrings by Xu Zhi.
Shoes by Prada.



Top by Rui Zhou.
Necklace, bracelet and inflatable coat by Syna Chen.
Skirt by Sorgenti.quan.
Earrings by Xu Zhi.
Choker by Louis Shengtao Chen.
Shoes by DIDU.

Customized dress by Marrknull.
Earrings by Xu Zhi.
Shoes by Salvatore Ferragamo.

Sweater by Avenue & Son, exclusively for SKP-S.
Bustle by Louis Shengtao Chen.
Trousers by CHENPENG. Earring by Midnight Opera House.

Headband, jumpsuit, sleeves
and belt by Chanel.
Legwarmers by CHENPENG.
Shoes by DIDU.

Long-sleeved jacket by Independent × Evisen, exclusively to SKP-S.
Short-sleeved jacket by Louis Shengtao Chen.
Top and trousers by Robert Wun.
Waist accessory by CHENPENG.
Vintage keyboard bag by A'N'D from Terminal69.

Model: Xiao Wen Ju. Creative direction: Fuwafuwa Studio and theBallroom. Make-up: Yooyo Keong Ming. Hair: Youhua Xu. Production: Adam Chen, Oolong Zhang.
Set design: Xiaolin Jiao, Yuan Bei, Shujie Chai. Fashion coordination: Yvonne Chu. Photography assistants: Jiabin Shen, You Wu, Yadi Xu, Dongpo Xie. Styling assistants: Yogamo Wang, Terisa Tan.
Make-up assistant: Zoe Zhan. Hair assistant: Tongjun Fang. Production assistants: Zijie Zhao, Zhicheng Li. Studio: Studio Geek.

Vest, top and cape by Prada.
Vintage skirt by Yohji Yamamoto from Terminal69.
Earrings and bracelet by Xu Zhi.

‘The next big frontier is the complete convergence of physical and digital.’

Farfetch founder José Neves discusses the reality of online success in physical lockdown.

Interview by Jonathan Wingfield
Photographs by Juergen Teller
Creative partner: Dovile Drizyte

Think of Farfetch, and you can't help but think of numbers. More than 2 million customers drawn from almost every market in the world. A $6.2 billion IPO in 2018. A thundering growth rate: a 64% average rise every year since 2015 and a stock price that has increased 546.5% during the pandemic. In under fifteen years, the digital-market-place-turned-'platform' founded by José Neves has become the defining fashion behemoth of our digital times, and Neves has been crowned the unexpected King of Fashion. His masterstroke, of course, has been that unlike many of his competitors in e-commerce, Farfetch has never held any physical goods, a nebulous and ever-evolving rapport between the material and the intangible that holds the key to the future of both Farfetch and perhaps fashion retail in general.

Prior to Farfetch, the Portuguese Neves was a teenage computer programmer and a product of London fashion retail – at 22, he founded footwear brand Swear and at 30, opened the multi-brand b store on Savile Row – and he's since made understanding the interplay between online and offline the backbone of his business. Today, Farfetch boasts a global network of over 700 independent bricks-and-mortar boutiques, as well as owning much-loved London retailer Browns. Starting life in 1970 as a tiny fashion store on Mayfair's South Molton Street, Browns was acquired by Farfetch in 2015, recently relocated around the corner to Brook Street and has been reinvented as a 'purveyor of experimental retail'. Neves considers Browns Brook Street, with its interactive mirrors, augmented-reality apps, and checkout-free payment, as the standard bearer of 'Luxury New Retail' or LNR, the term he's coined to define the future of the fashion retail experience. *System* recently connected with José Neves over Zoom to discuss online success in physical lockdown, the importance of virtual sneakers, and why Farfetch isn't nearly as powerful as some might have us believe.

Jonathan Wingfield: To what extent has this past year presented you with a kind of existential dilemma? On the one hand, the future of the physical boutiques behind Farfetch has never felt so uncertain, but at the same time, Farfetch as an online business has never performed so well.

José Neves: Our success is entirely dependent on the success of our boutiques and brands. Ninety percent of what we sell is via someone else's sales. We have teams in China and Japan, so our lockdown experience started in January 2020 before spreading to Europe and the US, with boutiques, brands and factories all shutting down. It wasn't a case of, 'Oh, what a fantastic year we're going to have online.' In those first few weeks, we dropped like a stone to our lowest-ever valuation. Not just us – everyone. All the companies that you might ultimately call 'winners' from the crisis began the year similarly, and many of them reacted by cutting staff. Airbnb fired 25% of its workforce and raised $1 billion at a 10% interest rate. That was the most visible one, but everyone was cutting 30% of their workforce, 40% of their costs. It was all about cash, like, 'Let's harvest as much cash as we can for the winter.'

> **'It wasn't a case of, 'Oh, what a fantastic year we're going to have online.' In those first few weeks of lockdown, we dropped to our lowest-ever valuation.'**

How did you avoid a similar fate at Farfetch?

One of the things that I am most proud of is that we were courageous enough to say, 'Hang on a sec, let's not jump to conclusions. We cannot save lives, but we can save businesses and jobs; we can provide a platform for this global creative community. We have 3,500 designers represented on Farfetch, and they totally depend on the boutiques and on our platform. There are over 700 independent retailers on the platform; they won't be able to survive this pandemic without us.' So, rather than cut, we decided to go the other way, and double down on our efforts. In April, very early on, we launched #SupportBoutiques, which was a comprehensive campaign to help small boutiques and designers everywhere, in any way we could. That paid off, resulting in an acceleration of sales for the boutiques and the brands, which translated into an acceleration of sales for Farfetch. Our success was a product of our beneficial impact on the fashion system, not the other way around: we didn't profit at anyone's expense. For us, these things are always totally linked; it's never one or the other, it's one *and* the other. It has to be. We continue to bet on this message that we are connected with the curators and the consumers around the world who love fashion, and that remains a central theme for this year, because we are not out of the woods yet.

Tell me about the conversations you've been having with boutique owners, and the insights you've been getting from them.

They tell us what they are seeing in the market, what they are going to buy, who the customers are, what customers like or don't like in-store, and we flow back to them information on digital customer behaviour, about which we have an incredible wealth of knowledge. It still works after 12 years, and we have this amazing relationship with the boutiques. I've known most of our boutique owners personally for many years, either because I sold my shoes to them for two decades, or because they were my buddies in the boutique trade, so I know the incredible wealth of curation and fashion knowledge and experience that they bring to the fashion system. A couple of years after we started Farfetch, we decided to do this thing called the Boutique Gathering. We invited about 50 or 60 boutiques to Portugal for a big party, people like Andrea Molteni of Tessabit in Como and Armand Hadida from L'Éclaireur in Paris; everyone we had worked with up to that point. Getting 100 people in the same room talking about the problems that independent retailers face was vital; getting them involved and talking about rising costs, practicalities, management, all these very practical aspects, but also our vision and how we were building. When we used to say this in 2010, people would roll their eyes, but we had a global vison of luxury and wanted to bring independent retailers together under one roof to become the most powerful force in the industry.

How do you think Farfetch has changed life for someone like Armand Hadida, the owner of L'Éclaireur?

Armand is probably one of the most celebrated fashion curators in the world, so there has always been mutual respect. We know that we need each other; there is a very strong sense of a win-win partnership. These days that just operates at a different scale. In 2019, we represented roughly 30% of the turnover of boutiques. Obviously, we don't have the exact numbers for 2020 yet, but we will represent a significant amount of their turnover. Things have also changed in terms of the scale of operations, of logistics; they have had to employ specific staff to meet Farfetch orders, and to rent warehouses. Things went from picking out five pieces a day – which was good at the time – and spending half an hour beautifully packaging those items for collection the next day, to receiving orders that have to be sent the same day, with a team of 20 people churning them out. So, for both sides, the scale is different, but the fundamentals remain, in terms of the human relationships and the ethos of the partnership.

The Browns London flagship store has just reopened. You use the term 'Luxury New Retail' in the store's official communiqué, and refer to the store 'serving the changing needs of the customer'. What are those changing needs, and what do they mean for physical stores?

With the digitalization of every single industry, the world was already changing very fast. That doesn't mean we will see the obliteration of physical stores, but it does mean that the experience in-store, as well as the connection between the store and the rest of the world, will be digitalized. That transformation has already happened in China. For many Chinese people, before they even arrive at a supermarket, their digital cart is already half-filled. They browse the selection, choose additional items, pay by facial recognition, walk out, and whatever they've purchased gets delivered immediately, so it's waiting for them when they return home. For them, that's normal, an everyday experience; that's just how they shop. And that is what we are trying to bring to luxury: the digitalization of how we shop. People in our industry continue to think of things in a two-by-two matrix: offline sales in physical stores, online sales through apps, mono-brand stores, and multi-brand stores. Right now, these things are still separate, so that even within one company, you have completely different departments – the store team, the website team, the wholesale team – and they don't really speak to each other. As a result, the user experience is rarely a seamless journey across these channels, but I think that will fundamentally change. That's what we are demonstrating with Browns. You can be at home on the Browns app or a brand app, such as the Off-White app, then in the Browns store, and then on Farfetch, and your shopping cart is shared across all of these platforms. Then you book an appointment at the store, and when you arrive an assistant knows your wish list, understands your tastes, and has things prepared for you. That's one of 250 customer journeys that we mapped out in studying how to make this work. I think this is the next big frontier: this complete convergence of digital and physical.

Are you ever surprised by the way that younger colleagues or your own kids engage with fashion now? Have there been instances when you've thought, 'Wow, I didn't see that coming'?

All the time! I have kids aged 2 to 22, so I know first-hand how they look at the world, how they are being inspired by trends, and how they buy things. My son likes gaming and spends his pocket money buying skins, which in itself is a multi-billion-dollar industry that's emerged in recent years. In gaming alone I think there will be a complete convergence of physical and digital. In the future, it will be very strange to buy just a physical sneaker; you'll want the physical and the digital versions together – a piece of fashion that you can wear on your real body and on your virtual bodies, whether you are in *Fortnite* or an avatar on social-media platforms. The whole world of digital gaming and social media is going to merge with the physical world.

> **'In the future, you'll buy physical and digital sneakers together – a piece of fashion that you can wear on your real body and on your virtual bodies.'**

How is this shift in the customer's relationship with material products affecting physical boutiques' sense of curation?

It is our job as a platform to really bring those boutiques on the journey; we are working on solutions right now. That is why Browns is so important, because we are demonstrating what can be done in a multi-brand environment. It also works with a mono-brand environment, too – we did it with Chanel – and what we are hoping to demonstrate is that all of the things that can happen with Chanel can also happen with L'Éclaireur, for example. No customer is going to download 800 apps from different boutiques, but everything can work seamlessly through one Farfetch app, almost like a loyalty scheme that works across different companies. The same app that knows you are inside Browns can know you are in L'Éclaireur and transform itself to give you the full digitalized experience in that store. That is what we are going to demonstrate with Browns, and we will fully kit boutiques out with everything they need to do the same.

How do you personally reconcile the importance of staying ahead of the game with your own advancing years?

[Laughs] Good question! Being 'revolutionary' is one of our fundamental values at the company – we have it written everywhere – and I think that spirit will always remain. I was just on a call with our open innovation and R&D teams and they were showing me virtual trying-on systems for watches and jewellery that were mind-boggling, even for me. But I love that! On the other hand, there is a level of maturity that comes with being a public company. There is no such thing as a small project any more; we can't put just anything out there. Everything needs to be compliant with literally dozens of financial and data regulators around the world. You could call us a grown-up revolutionary, one that's replaced the young Che Guevara.

You mentioned earlier that people in the industry used to roll their eyes at your plans, but Farfetch is now the one driving the industry forwards. Can you pinpoint a particular moment when you thought, 'OK, I think they are onboard; they finally see the future?'
People still don't completely get it, but I think that is a good sign because we are constantly reinventing ourselves. By 2016, the Farfetch marketplace was accepted as a great place for boutiques and businesses, and then we opened up to working with brands. Then we had 550 brands on the platform, and we created the white-label arm of the business, working with companies from Chanel to Harrods. Now we are presenting the store of the future and Luxury New Retail. We push the boundaries into unsteady terrain, find our balance, then push the boundaries again.

I heard that, at one stage, Gucci was concerned that Farfetch had access to more Gucci stock than Gucci itself, and that Gucci saw that as a threat… Would you agree that sometimes Farfetch might be considered almost too powerful in the industry?
It's just not the reality. We are a $3 billion company – based on net sales for 2020 – in a $300 billion industry. That is one percent. Relative to the industry, we are a tiny company compared with, say, Spotify, which has 50% of all music sales, or Expedia and Booking, which, between those two platforms, have 85% of all hotel reservations around the world. In that example, you talk about being too powerful for their own good, but we are just 1% of the market share.

Is diplomacy your greatest attribute?
Quite possibly! It is the nature of being a platform: you sell other peoples' products, and you mediate between brands, boutiques and consumers. That all requires a tremendous amount of diplomacy, because the brands see each other as competitors, and they would love to have access to all the customer data, but we can't do that, legally. If the brands had their way, they would each be the only one on Farfetch, and would have all the customers for themselves. Naturally, I would love to offer that, but it just doesn't work that way, so you have to be diplomatic.

Jonathan Anderson often talks about his experiences working in retail at the start of his career – in the Prada concession of a Dublin department store – and how that continues to inform his work as a creative director. Given that you yourself once owned an independent boutique, how does that experience inform your thinking at Farfetch?
I am with Jonathan Anderson on that one. I still remember the first pair of shoes I sold in Swear, which was a 250-square-foot hole in the wall. It was literally the smallest shop you would ever encounter, but I remember the pleasure and the excitement in the eyes of the customers. And I remember the crushing disappointment when there was a problem with the quality, or a sole falling off, and we had to replace them or refund them. And then when we opened the b store, and had designers like Roksanda Ilinčić and Boudicca come in to see their collections displayed, I will never forget the excitement in their eyes as they asked how the collection was being received, what was selling and what wasn't selling. These are the emotional foundations for what you do, for the love of fashion, and you cannot develop this love in a conceptual way. You develop it in human relationships; you develop it on the shop floor, by touching things and speaking to people. This is our biggest advantage over Amazon. They love selling everything, but they are not in love with this particular part of culture. That love is a very soft, subtle, almost invisible, but super-important ingredient.

Tell me about the last memorable physical shopping experience you had…
In July 2019, I took my four kids to Tokyo. I was alone, because my wife was at home pregnant. It's pretty difficult handling four kids on your own in an airport, and I ended up losing my hand luggage, so I had to do a quick, complete head-to-toe shop the moment we arrived in Tokyo. It remains one of the coolest cities to shop in and it was amazing: several looks, for several days, including a professional event I had to attend, all in physical stores that were not my stores. In one hectic but inspiring morning, I got to experience the incredible service in Isetan department store, the monumental beauty of the Prada flagship in Aoyama, and then find limited-edition sneakers in a tiny backstreet specialist store in Harajuku. There was no better reminder of the magic of physical retail. It gave me a lot of ideas – because it always comes back to that shopping experience.

First photography assistant: Tom Ortiz. Second photography assistant: Victoire de Lencquesaing. Post-production: Catalin Plesa @ quickfixretouch.

The benchmark

How one New Yorker's latest publication was created on a park bench. By Kim Hastreiter. Illustration by Pierre Mornet.

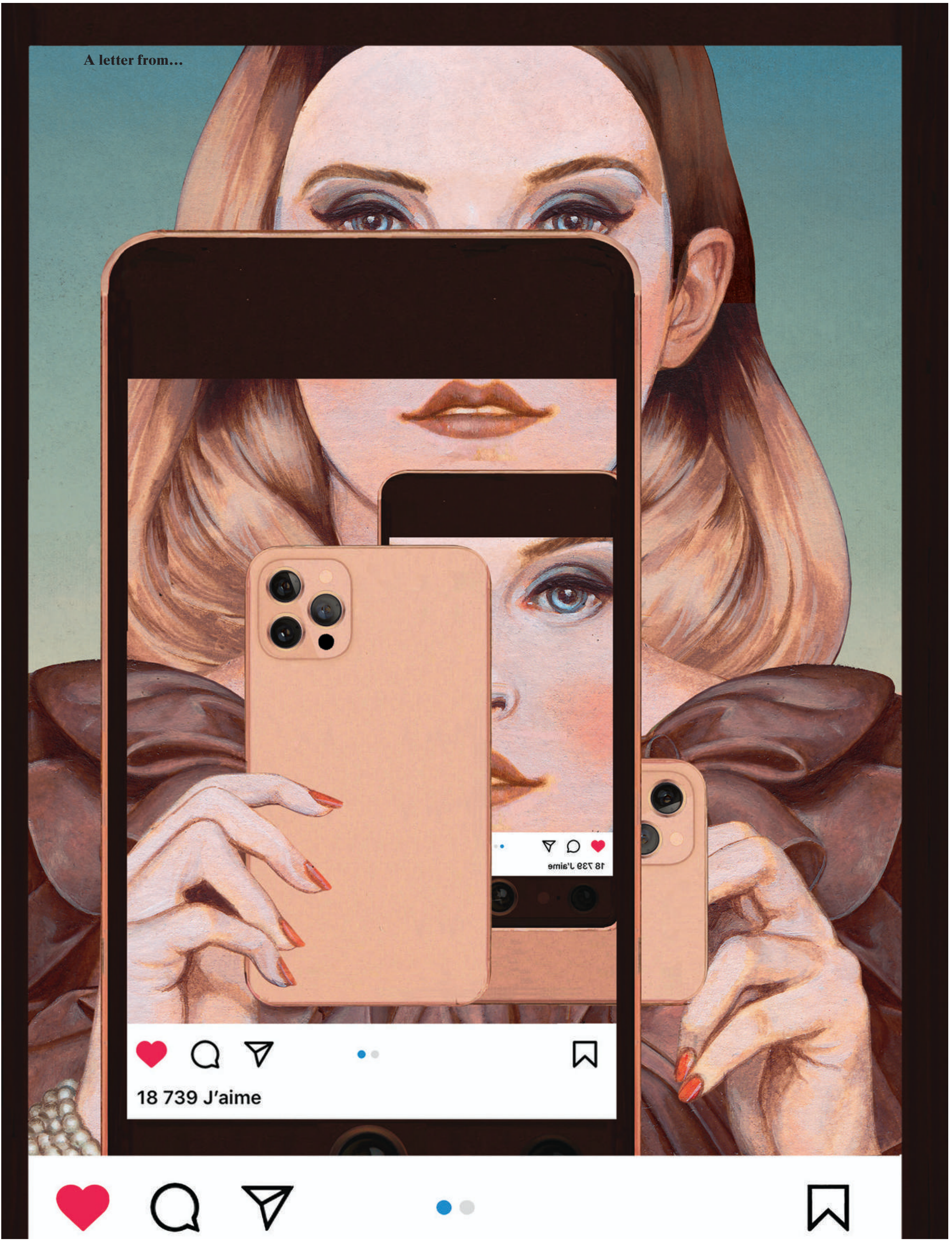
It was all a bit shocking and weird when Covid-19 first reared its ugly head in New York City and shut us down early last March. Suddenly my only connection with the street became my terrace overlooking Washington Square, and my only connection with my people was on Zoom. The trauma from the terror of a raging pandemic devastating NYC in April was real. It was compounded by the racist incompetence and criminal behaviour of you-know-who, and the sudden detonation of rage as tens of thousands took to the street with BLM after George Floyd's murder by a policeman, which unmasked the underlying white supremacy that our country had been built upon for the past 400 years. It was *a lot*. March melted into April and then May and I felt lost and unproductive. All I could do was cook soup.

Despite the chaos and trauma, crocuses still bloomed, and spring arrived on schedule. (You can always count on nature for a reality check.) I cried constantly, but slowly ventured outside for walks dressed in moonsuit-like protection and began meeting my amazing friends – who I missed desperately – every day on my favourite bench in the park downstairs. My artist nephew Max even made me a cute 'Kim's office' sign to hang on the back of my bench. I had been starved of human contact and was dying to know what all my amazing, creative New York peeps, young and old, had been thinking, seeing, doing and working on in *their* isolation. What did they think of this new now? Were they crying every day like me? How was a 23-year-old living this shitshow? One of my favourite young artists, Jack Shannon, described how his friend had a van with a great sound system and would text their posse, often after midnight, to meet up in a parking lot on the West Side Highway across from the Whitney Museum where they would dance for hours. I began feeling tinges of inspiration; I realized stuff was being created, but because of Covid isolation, none of these ideas were being shared.

Now, I'm a natural problem solver; I live for emergencies. (I could have been a triage nurse.) Yet I was stumped about how to fix what was going on and it was driving me *nuts*. Then, one sleepless night at 3am in early June, as I ate my third cannabis gummy, I suddenly had an epiphany. So many of us couldn't produce work because the ground we stood on was unstable and the rug was being pulled out from us every single day. How can you create anything new if you don't even know where you are starting from?

I had millions of opinions about what was going on and became energized by comparing notes in my park 'office' with the other alternative thinkers I'd knock heads with. Everyone seemed to be feeling traumatized and alone, and having trouble making work. So I decided to create a historical document that would humanize the 'NOW' – a simple black-and-white newspaper that would bear witness to what living through this insanity actually meant to my beloved community. I'd make a non-commercial public artwork, a generous, pure and multigenerational public service: free of charge, free of ads, and free of the internet (and the echo chambers of social media). And I'd call it *The New Now*.

From my park bench, I began to ask different people I knew, loved and admired to contribute their views on subjects I'd been thinking about. It turned out everyone had been thinking about the same things: time, animals, nature, dreams, God, coping mechanisms, mortality, sex, generational differences in future outlooks, wage and food injustice, mental health, baking bread, and yes, soup. (Everyone was cooking soup.) Once the stories rolled in from my talented friends, including Michael Stipe, Laila Gohar, Ted Muehling, Cheryl Dunn, Bethann Hardison, Andre Walker, and as I began putting them altogether, I realized that the *New Now* was just like one of the great dinner parties I often throw, gathering amazing people together who I know, want to get to know, and want to get to know each other. In retrospect, doing this newspaper was really my personal coping mechanism, my way of dealing with this tragic time. Working intimately with each contributor made me feel totally inspired and much less alone, and I even got to meet new people and make new friends doing it. Since we launched, many of the 6,000 people who got a copy have written to thank me and tell me that *The New Now* made them feel uplifted and less alone. What more could I want?



The edge of influence

I post, therefore I am… like you.

By Camille Charrière. Illustration by Pierre Mornet.

Do you remember your first e-mail address? Mine was a made-up word. I remember the feeling of frustration that all the teenage clangers (camillecharriere87, camizcool, sassy_camy, hottiewithabodi69…) were taken, so I settled for four random letters stitched together: I became tyox@hotmail.com. A username that sounded like toxic waste, so no one would pinch it. It wasn’t really me; it was just my e-mail.

This was perhaps more apposite than I realized at the time. I now earn a living as an influencer and we are constantly being told we are noxious. Like being blamed for the state of the media today, even if – I need hardly remind you – we are really not lying around in our bedrooms like Dr. Evil, planning the demise of journalism. In those early internet days, going *online* didn’t feel real, certainly not in the way that it does today. The world wide web was a portal to escape our mundane existence rather than a way to broadcast ourselves. It was where I went to explore different versions of myself, a space I could try on different personas, take risks, make mistakes, and embarrass myself (there was a lot of that).

Back then, print media ruled and there was no real work in fashion: too many gatekeepers, too much nepotism, and very little money on offer. Then social media erupted and a whole generation started publishing its own content. Marginalized communities found a place where their voices were no longer dismissed or silenced. Early users like myself stopped trying to crash the existing spaces and just built our own. None of it was strategic, but it quickly became obvious that a strong online presence brought valuable followers and with them, real power. I was not only earning more than my fellow law students, but, more importantly, I had found a seat at the table. I now had a voice. That’s when the questions started. Did you buy your followers? Can you really make money on Instagram? What do you do all day? Can you tag me? Can I send you this for free? Can you help me grow my business? Can you tag my wife’s cousin’s toothbrush company?

What I do know is that you in the industry need us. Our help is vital in selling your products and spreading your messages, even if you’ve turned what we do into a derogatory term. ‘Oh, she’s an *influencer*’ always seems to be said in an accusatory fashion, as if we are being deceitful and doing something to people despite their consent. I am not complaining about my job and I fully acknowledge how privileged I am to make money the way I do. Yet no one is simultaneously lower on the fashion food chain and so vital to the current ecosystem than the influencer. Every magazine, every platform, every brand, high and low, is trying to emulate the reach that we have accumulated across YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter and Clubhouse. All while blaming us for all the evil isms that plague our modern world – consumerism, individualism, capitalism, narcissism.

So you’ll forgive me for not using this space to take you through what it is that I – *we* – actually do, or for not being as self-deprecating as I normally am. Words matter, you see; labels matter. The world as we knew it has changed. It had already started to shift pre-pandemic, and is now unrecognizable. In this new normal, our screen time is so out of control that we have to set alarms to remind ourselves to spend more time in the real world. You can stop asking whether we are real, though. Or whether influencers are over yet. I am no more or less real than any other business owner, trying to survive these unprecedented times.

Us content creators can certainly do better by our audience, especially on topics such as promoting sustainability, healthier body image, transparency, and inclusivity. Those are all areas I’m personally working on. But we’re all moving parts of the same system. So perhaps it’s time to see us as allies rather than the reason the world is falling apart. After all, we are just holding up a mirror. Don’t shoot the messenger or @ me for that matter. I’m too busy taking that selfie you’ll hopefully soon be liking.

Speak up, stand out

A personal take on #StopAsianHate's past, present and future. By Patrick Li. Illustration by Pierre Mornet.

'Don't cause any trouble' was something that I was told for much of my childhood. 'Study hard. Don't call attention to yourself. Keep your voice down.' I knew early on that these clichés were particular to Chinese kids like me. Yet I wasn't in China where my parents had originated; I was in San Jose, California, where my non-Asian classmates were taught that each of them was special, that they *should* speak up, that they *should* stand out. And many of them were rewarded accordingly, or at least weren't penalized for the very things that I was taught not to be.

Fast forward years later to the global pandemic that has brought the world to a standstill. Many of us have suddenly had time and space to reflect on the radical upheaval of our culture. Seismic shifts have exposed a multitude of racial and social inequities that were already at boiling point, while Black Lives Matter demonstrations following George Floyd's killing in May 2020 rocked the US and accelerated long overdue calls for racial justice in many countries.

Since Covid-19 first emerged, now former president Trump's incendiary rhetoric that it was a Chinese virus normalized and implicitly encouraged anti-Asian racism. A growing number of incidents of subtle bigotry and explicitly vicious attacks have become distressingly common. On 28 January 2021, a fatal assault on an 84-year-old Thai immigrant, Vicha Ratanapakdee, in San Francisco was captured on video and shared hundreds of thousands of times. Where once this horrific attack might have been seen but soon forgotten, this time it became a tipping point in the recognition of hate crimes targeting Asians.

In its wake, many of my Asian brothers and sisters in the culture and fashion communities, particularly designer Phillip Lim, realized they had to respond to this urgency. They defied those cultural directives 'not to speak up' and 'not to stand out' and did the opposite. Phillip partnered with several other involved Asians to give voice to #STOPASIANHATE, and I designed a hashtag logo for non-profit group All of Us Movement. Through a partnership with GoFundMe, we raised over $1 million in just one day to benefit grassroots Asian-American and Pacific-Islander advocacy groups.

In mid-March, another senseless and racist attack claimed eight victims in Atlanta, six of whom were of Asian descent. The nation was incensed – again – but somehow this felt different for many Asians. First, there was already a name and language to define our moral outrage. Secondly, many of us realized that others were also recognizing the injustices that they previously might simply have been endured at best, ignored at worst. We also saw white privilege again raise its head when the Atlanta police officer said the killer had been having 'a bad day', but this time, it was called out and knocked down. A wave of grief was being transformed into a movement.

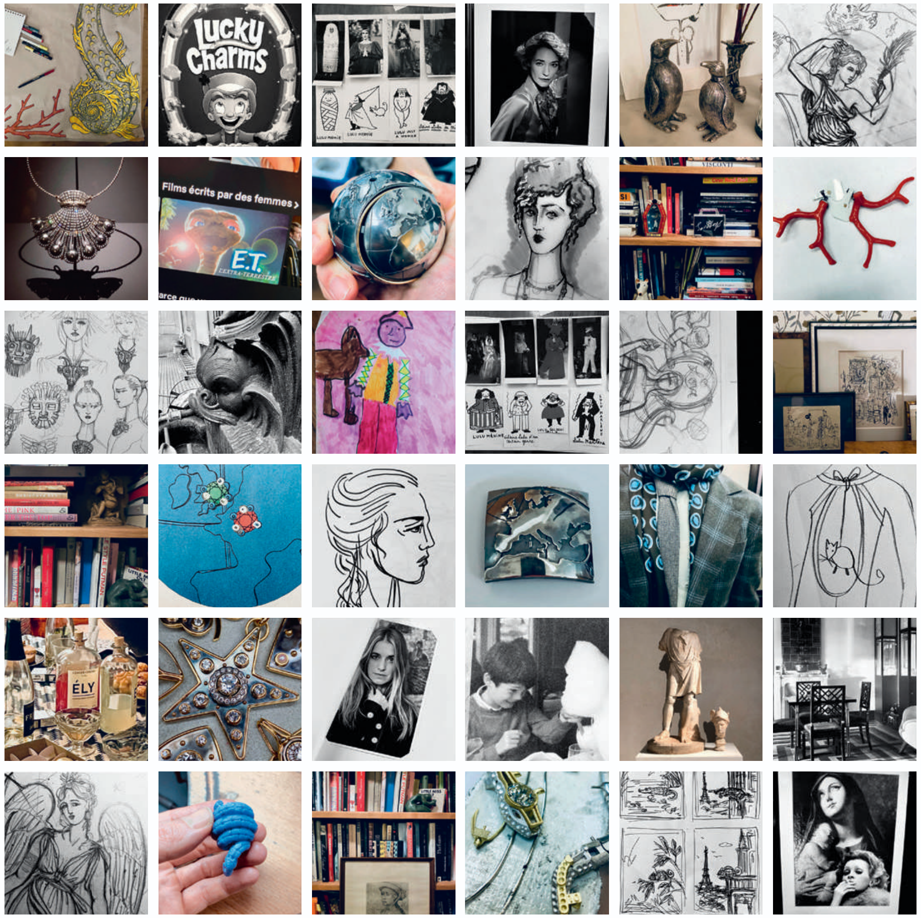
Yet Asian hate crimes continued: more micro-aggressions, more taunting, more violence. Yet this time, anger turned to advocacy, with each additional act of discrimination further enraging us. Somehow this time, we have been able to hear and listen to each other. We are realizing that our voices are collectively strong, not as a singular monolith, but as millions of individuals across the entire Asian diaspora. And it is more evident than ever that these voices – our voices – matter.

So where do we go from here? One thing is certain: there is a moral exigency to make social progress. Those of us Asians in cultural industries like fashion have a timely opportunity – and the visibility – to open up a real conversation; indeed, we now have a responsibility. We must act – and must use the tools at hand to ensure proper representation. We need to demand our places at decision-making tables. We need to be heard. We need to recognize and empower each other. And we must use our collective voices to ensure that Asian hate is pushed over the edge, that it will not be tolerated. Enough is finally enough.

It might seem that by speaking up that we are defying our elders' directives. But are we really? Perhaps we are doing exactly what they already did. Just as they emigrated to the US seeking opportunities for themselves and their children, we too are paving the way for tomorrow's destinies. In fact, we are honouring them by following in their footsteps, struggling as they did, to reimagine the future.

Camera roll

By Elie Top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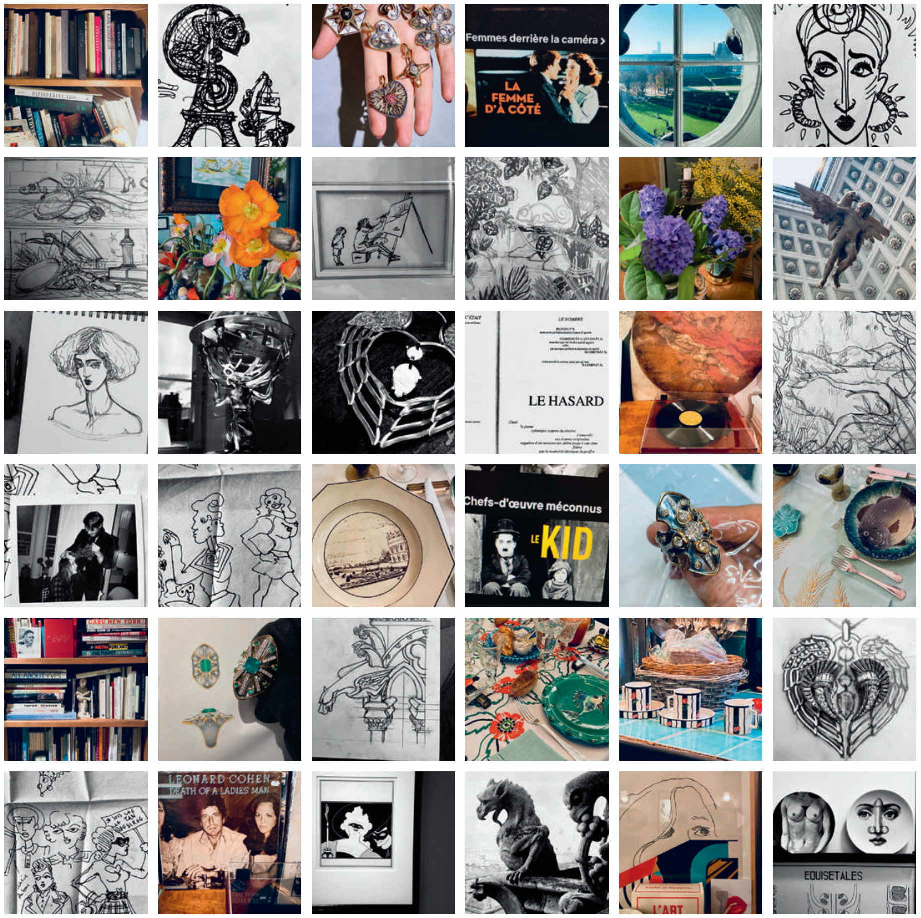
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LE HASARD
Chefs-d'œuvre méconnus
LE KID
LEONARD COHEN
DEATH OF A LADIES' MAN
L'ART
EQUISETALES

‘An entire event rather than just a few sweaters.’

When Kim Jones asked painter Peter Doig to collaborate on this season’s Dior Men collection, the uncanny ties between the artist and Christian Dior himself slowly began to reveal themselves…

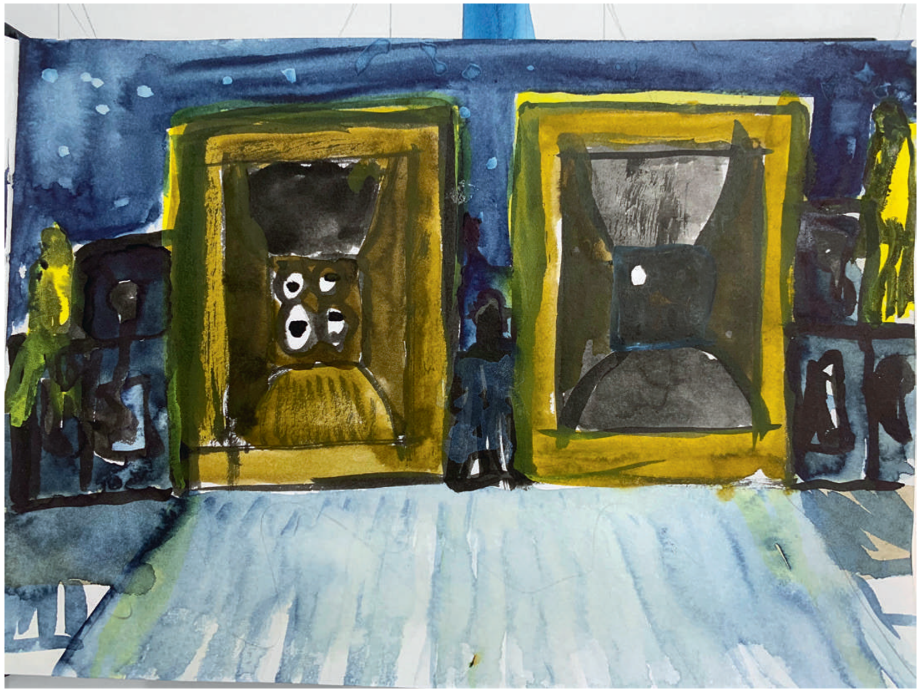
Interview by Jerry Stafford
Photographs by Benoît Peverelli

British artist Peter Doig can spend up to three years completing a single canvas, without either personal or studio assistance, leading an almost hermetic existence in the tropical highlands of Trinidad, where he has lived and painted for many years. As creative director and designer for Dior Homme and Fendi, Kim Jones currently produces a dazzling display of eight commercial collections a year and works with an extensive design team that straddles Paris, London and Rome.

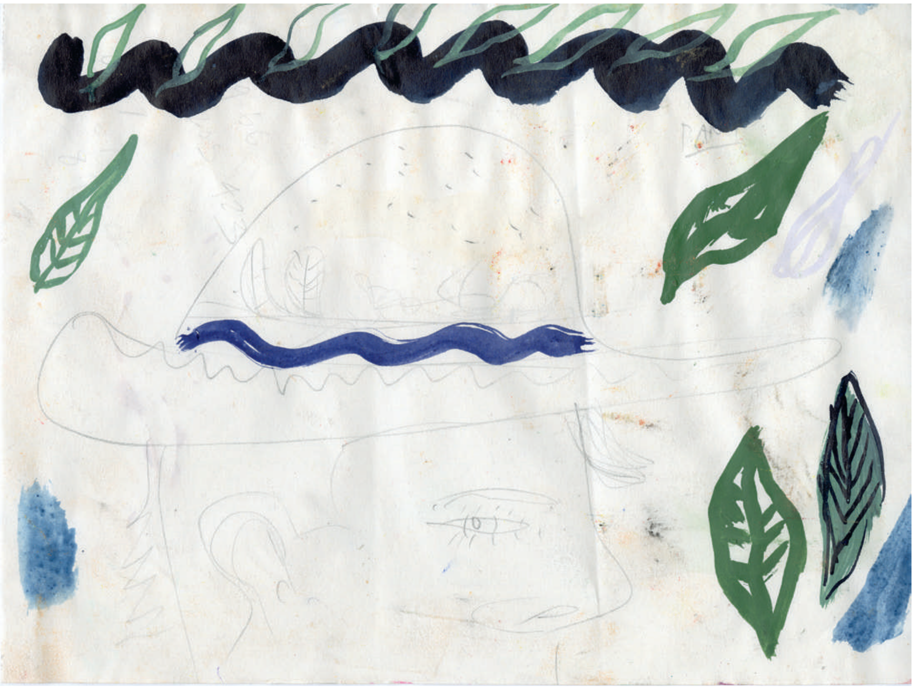
Doig is a resolutely private individual who habitually shuns the spotlight even though he is one of the most celebrated artists of his generation, while Jones' meteoric rise to fashion notoriety has catapulted him to the centre of an international media circus. Doig, an avid skier and winter sportsman whose work has often been inspired by his passion, spends several months of the year in the tiny Swiss mountain resort of Zermatt, exploring its precipitous peaks and slopes. Jones, meanwhile, is more at home on the vast sun-baked plains of Africa.

Although their work and their worlds might not at first glance seem mutually compatible or coherent, Jones approached Doig over the summer of last year to collaborate on his Autumn/Winter 2021 Dior Men collection. The designer is the first to admit that, 'everyone was a bit shocked when I said we were going to work with Peter.
People knew and loved his work, but he is a bit of an enigma.
I wanted to turn things up a bit, in a different way.'

After a tentative text correspondence, the two finally met at Doig's home in London, where the walls are hung with work by painters for whom they discovered a mutual admiration. A creative and personal rapport was quickly established that revealed common ground in both their past and present lives. Both graduates of London's Saint Martins – Doig in fine arts, Jones in fashion – they also share a love of the moment in the early 1980s when the school was the epicentre of a now legendary art, club and fashion scene filled with larger-than-life creative characters – among them Judy Blame, Boy George, Leigh Bowery and John Galliano – who spent their nights at underground clubs such as Blitz and Taboo. Doig experienced this highly influential world first-hand as a student, while Jones has been almost obsessively fascinated by it since the start of his career in the early 2000s. 'It's very rare when you meet people who have the specific references that Peter and I share,' says Jones. 'It just blew my mind, the music he was playing and the artists he was talking about, like the painter Trojan and the whole world of Leigh Bowery. They have all always fascinated me even though I didn't see them myself.'



Speaker Study 1, watercolour on paper, 2020

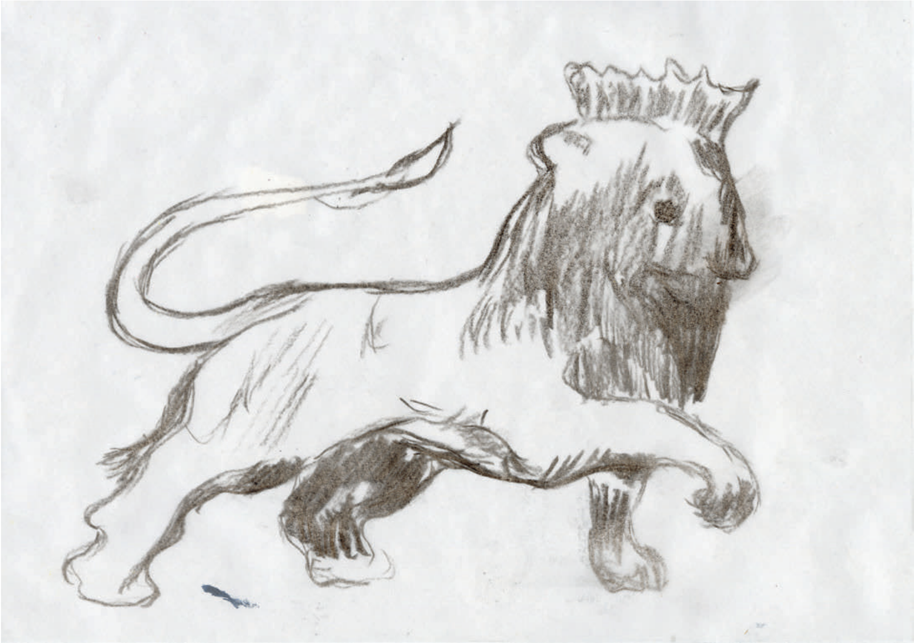


Study for 'Embah' Bowler Hat, pigment on paper, 2020

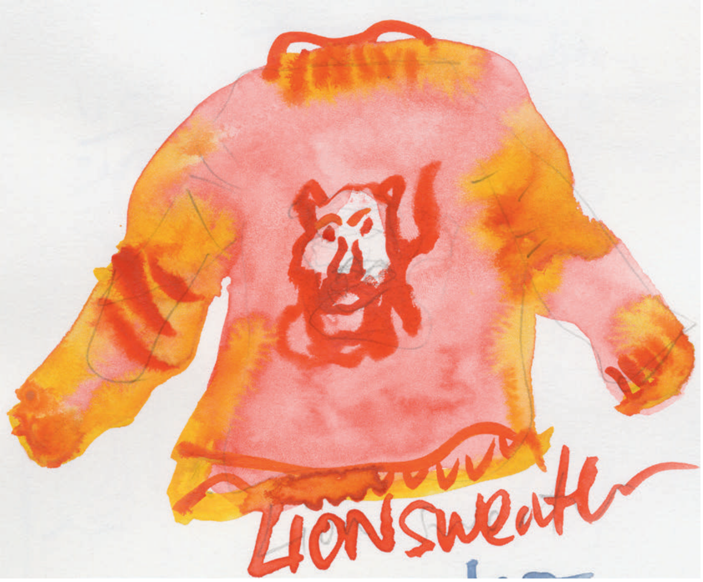
An unexpected and fascinating creative synergy emerged from these initial meetings, and Doig and Jones then spent time looking into Dior's extensive archive, where uncanny correspondences between the artist and Christian Dior became apparent: a painting by French illustrator Christian Bérard once in Christian Dior's own collection is now owned by Doig, and a photograph of Dior dressed in a lion costume, which Doig reinterpreted for the show's invitation, reminded the painter of his own signature Lion of Judah motif. 'I always look for things that bring us back to Dior as a French brand, and so to where there was a relationship between Dior and Peter's work,' says Jones. 'So we looked at some of the ceremonial aspects of his work, which are also found in Le Douanier Rousseau, who we both love, and we then pulled it back to Paris.'

Together, Doig and Jones explored the rich visual lexicon of the artist's body of work for inspiration – the hypnotic, often hallucinatory tropical and mountain dreamscapes, and elusive enigmatic figures – and Doig created new material specifically for the menswear collection, working closely with Jones and his design team on every aspect and detail. Milliner Stephen Jones, a close friend of both designer and artist, who has worked with Dior for over 20 years, even travelled to Venice, where Doig was in lockdown last Christmas, to collaborate on the exquisite hand-painted bowlers and berets that would feature in the presentation. The elements of Doig's work selected for the collection were then gracefully and meticulously transferred from canvas to clothing thanks to Dior's *couture* atelier, which skilfully translated the sensorial and layered nuance of his painting technique into embroideries, jacquards, knitwear and prints.

The result is arguably the most accomplished artistic collaboration of Kim Jones' career at Dior and can be seen as a benchmark of how to approach and make a success of what may now be a fashion commonplace, but too often feels gratuitous and unfulfilling. 'Peter works in a very solitary way, while we work as a team in a collaborative way,' say Jones. 'But I think he really enjoyed being part of our community, especially in light of the recent restrictions. The whole creative process was exciting. Everyone really respected him as an artist – and I made a great new friend.'

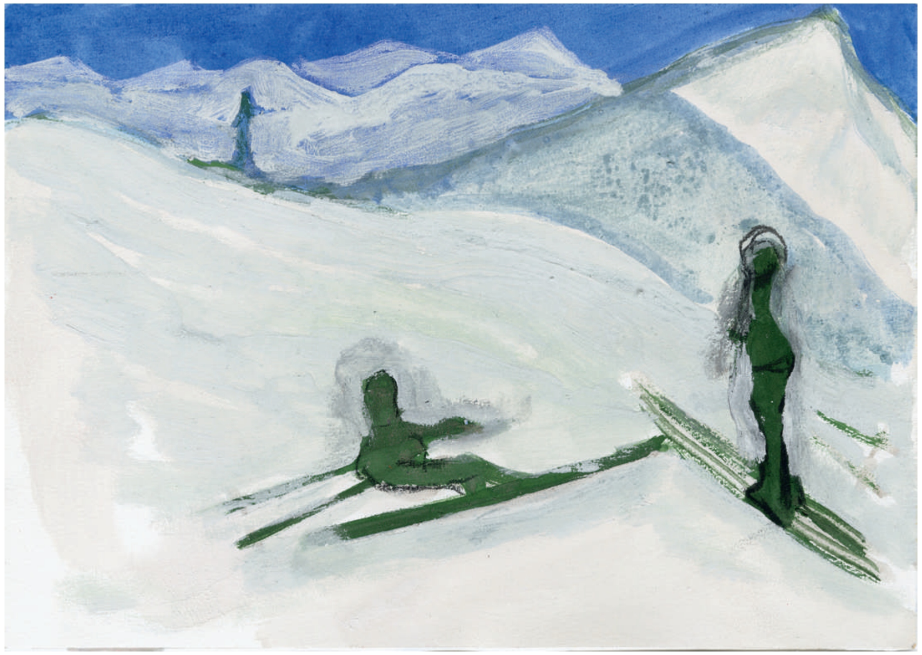


Lion Study, charcoal on paper, 2020



Lion Sweater, watercolour on paper, 2020

Peter Doig wears pieces from the Autumn/Winter 2021 Dior Men collection.
Sittings editor: Jerry Stafford.



Young Skiers Zermatt, pigment and charcoal on paper, 2021

Jerry Stafford: The photographs that Benoît Peverelli shot with you around Zermatt for this feature are epic.
Peter Doig: You could tell he was genuinely blown away. He's Swiss and he was shocked that he'd never been here before – it was the first time Benoît had seen the Matterhorn. He couldn't take his eyes off the mountains.

He told me he saw more wonder in that one day than he's seen in the previous three months.
It is the supermodel of peaks!

You got to the ice cave, too.
Benoît seemed to be pretty adventurous. Getting in there was OK – getting out was a bit trickier.

> **'I'm an artist who works on his own – I've never had an assistant – so to be invited to work with this group of people was something I really enjoyed.'**

Let's discuss your Dior Men collaboration with Kim Jones. How did it come about, and how did it evolve?
I didn't know much about Kim's work, other than that the Chapman brothers, Jake and Dinos, had worked with him. I started just talking to him and getting to know his interests. I was intrigued by the art that Kim has collected and is passionate about. It felt surprising, considering how his work is so associated with pop culture, people like Supreme. Then to find out that he was really into the Bloomsbury Group[1] and how that was connected to where he comes from, I found that surprising. I liked that he really appreciated work that was to do with touch, and that he was passionate about painting.

So you met up in London?
Kim texted me a few times, but I first met him when you both came round to my place. You instigated those initial meetings and that was when I realized that there was a lot of common ground and shared interests. Kim seemed to be willing to allow the collaboration to be its own thing, rather than something prescribed. He didn't just want four or five of my images to turn into something; he seemed to be intrigued by my interest in being more involved than that.

What were your initial feelings? Were you slightly distrustful of this kind of relationship? It's become something of a trend in the fashion and art worlds.
I did look at the downside to begin with. Why commercialize the work to this extent? Is it necessary? No. So, why do it? What's the point? But then I thought maybe that was an interesting thing. In some ways, it is not much different to working with a really great print studio when you make a limited edition; there is very much a craft element when you make the etching plate. You might create an edition of 30 or 200, but that is mass-producing your own work, whether you like it or not. I spoke at length with Stephen Jones and he talked about the Dior atelier and the couture aspect of the collection, which sounded really exciting. Even though some items would be mass-produced, there was an opportunity to engage the atelier and make garments that would utilize the level of skill and craftsmanship there, which is second to none. The idea of working with this old studio was exciting, one with this tradition going back to when Christian Dior himself was alive and working. Then, of course, remembering that Dior had also been an art dealer, before he was a fashion designer and had relationships with many artists was exciting. In fact, I own a painting by Christian Bérard that once belonged to Christian Dior. His work is very painterly, very expressive; it's open.

How was that first meeting at your place in London? It's a wonderful space hung with many paintings, some of your own but mostly other artists you admire…
There was some work there that Kim also collects, like Trojan,[2] so there was that connection. That led him to talk a lot about the work of those designers from our generation, from the early 1980s, who he really respects and collects: Leigh Bowery, Rachel Auburn, Christopher Nemeth, Stephen Linard.[3] He has his own archive and it was really interesting to see he had gone to such lengths to collect. It's not just a piece here and there; it's really obsessive.

Your work with Michael Clark also really excited him…
The Michael Clark exhibition was just about to open at the Barbican[4] and he was lending a painting and other works. A painting I had made for one of Michael's performances was also in the exhibition, so there was that connection as well. He was obviously also very interested in dance music, with quite a collection, including a lot of Larry Levan[5] stuff. And I remember even at the first meeting in the house, he was already talking about potential music for the show; it was the whole package

rather than just a few sketches here and there. That got me quite excited, because it felt like we were embarking on a stage production, something theatrical, an entire event rather than just a few sweaters.

That club culture we personally experienced as friends, from the late 1970s to the late 1980s produced a lot of artists, some of them well known, like Cerith Wyn Evans or Isaac Julien, others less so. Both you and Kim have always been great champions of those lesser-known artists, like Trojan, Duggie Fields or Caroline Coon.[6] What do you think was so special about that time?

> **‘Kim allowed the collaboration to be its own thing, rather than something prescribed. He didn’t just want five of my images to turn into a few sweaters.’**

Without getting too nostalgic, it was fascinating because we all seemed to have so much time on our hands! That was partly because there were very few career possibilities for most of us, so we used our time, and we had the gift of the dole and very cheap housing! This is all stuff that has been talked about so much, but it is really important. It astounds me that an artist like Trojan, who died at the age of 22, was such an active person and produced so much work during his daylight hours, or his night-time hours. I don’t know how he did it. It just seems to keep on, things keep on appearing, and you think, how did this young person do this? But he wasn’t the only one. People found the time to do things. There were so fewer distractions; we didn’t have computers or phones. We just had this camaraderie and places where you met in the evenings or at night and then you had these vast days to just sort of fill. And I think a lot of people made great use of that.

What do you think Kim takes from that period?

All the stuff that he loves and that we all appreciate was made by hook or by crook, on a shoestring and yet, that itself is like the height of couture, the height of handmade craft and self-expression. All those things are very difficult to do when you work for a big fashion house.

One of your first shows was in Florence in the mid-1980s alongside Trojan, artist filmmaker John Maybury and photographer Holly Warburton. How did that show come about?

It was the first foreign show and came about via two people, Victoria Fernandez and Iain R. Webb.[7] They had been asked to do some sort of fashion exchange with a shop in Florence called Luisa Via Roma, which had this art side, too. The shop was closed because it was August and totally empty, so they took the opportunity to turn it into a gallery. The interesting thing is that in those days, no galleries in London would take on the likes of those artists or give them a break. It was a strange time because there was so much happening for designers and so much possibility and visibility through the press with new magazines, like *i-D*, *The Face* and *Blitz*, but for young artists, there was very little or no exposure. Back then, exposure meant seeing something in real life or pictured in the press. There was nothing in-between, unless someone sent you a photograph they had taken of the thing and sent it to you in the post. It was a very different time.

You and Kim both attended Saint Martins, but at different times. Were your experiences there similar in any way? Who were some of your contemporaries?

In my time, there was a huge amount of social crossover between the fashion department and the painting department. We socialized within the college because we had this great café run by Coffee Bar Dave[8] where people would meet sporadically during the day. That would then spill over into the pubs and the clubs at night. John Galliano was a contemporary of mine and best friends with one of my best friends, the painter David Harrison.[9] So John was often in the painting studios and David’s space was always like a little social quarter. He would be working, painting and chatting with his gang sitting around and they would often feature in the paintings. It was quite something. I couldn’t work like that! It would be fair to say that he was a real mentor to John and to Isaac Julien. A little older than me, a year ahead were Fiona Dealey, Richard Ostell, Darla Jane Gilroy,[10] and of course, Stephen Linard. Cerith Wyn Evans had been there the year before, as had Stephen Jones, but their presence was still very much felt. We would see them around. At the time, the scene around Saint Martins was vast. There would be people like George O’Dowd[11] coming to the college parties, which were very popular. There were the pubs we went to on Thursday and Friday nights, where students from other colleges would come and other interesting people, before we went to the clubs. Saint Martins was a kind of a hub.

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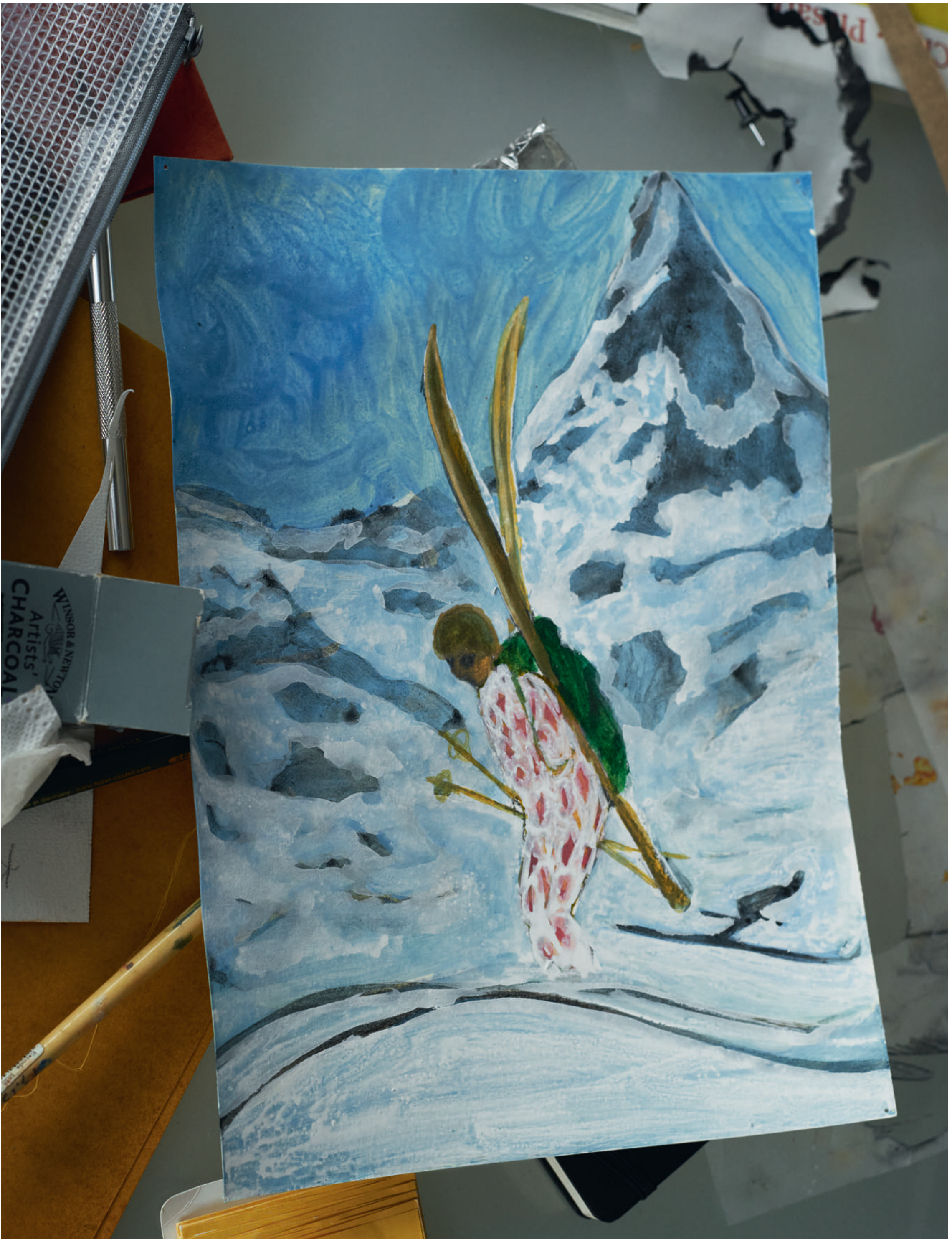


As you said earlier, Christian Dior himself had a long and important association with artists and early 20th-century figurative art. Did this influence how you and Kim approached your preparatory work?
We definitely discussed it and it was exhilarating to remember that Dior had owned this painting by Bérard, for example. I was reminded of it when I was in the archives in Paris, flicking through books and there was this picture we found of Dior in his study with the painting behind him – that sent a chill down my spine. I also looked into other artists who had worked within or dipped their toe into fashion and there was Zika Ascher, who made textile prints in London with Henry Moore and also for Dior.[12] There are unexpected people, too; look, for example, at the decorative work that Francis Bacon did before he became a painter.[13] So I just thought, if you are going to do it, do it on your own terms – and I think that is what we did. We worked in a way that was maybe unusual for Kim, but I think he and his design team enjoyed it.

‘Christian Dior had also been an art dealer before he was a fashion designer. In fact, I own a painting by Christian Bérard that once belonged to Dior.’

During your visits to the Dior archive you discovered a photograph of Christian Dior dressed by Pierre Cardin in a lion costume. That must have been a bit of a eureka moment.
The archive is basically run by one woman, Soizic Pfaff,[14] who has been working at Dior for decades and decades and knows the archive inside out. We could just ask her if she had anything on for example Dior and Bérard’s relationship, and she would bring out books, pictures and files. We also looked at a lot of shoes and clothes and hats. The hats were really impressive – they were so handmade and witty, and beautifully crafted. So, one day, she pulled out this photograph of Dior wearing a lion costume, which as you say was designed by Pierre Cardin, who had made the costumes for Cocteau’s *Beauty and the Beast* that Bérard had designed. I had already begun bringing some of my lion imagery and colours from those paintings into the collection, but I was a bit nervous because I think of the lion as being sacred in a way. The Lion of Judah is probably one of the most mass-produced of religious images after Christ, but I was still unsure about mass producing it, about whether it was the right thing to do. Seeing Dior in the lion costume at a ball in this really carnival-esque image made a really strong connection, because I’d made a painting of a carnival lion that we had decided to use in little bits of the collection. I ended up putting it on the invitation and on the ‘Leigh Bowery’ hat that you brought to Zermatt for the shoot.

How did you get so involved in the collection’s creative process when we were all pretty much locked down because of the pandemic?
Like I said, I was very excited by the idea of working with the atelier. There is one in London and I naively thought that there would be people beavering away making things and I would be able to just pop in once in a while and see someone doing some embroidery. It didn’t quite work out like that, but I did go to all the design meetings. They reminded me of a tutorial: a group of people sit and look at the artists’ work and then make comments. It was fascinating. When we decided to go forward with the collaboration, I went through all my paintings and took details of all the clothes and costumes that I have painted over the years, the ones I thought were relevant and then I sent those to Kim en masse. I put them into different categories and then I went through paintings and chose things that I thought might make interesting patterns. There was a whole skiwear idea, so I went through the ski-related works. I probably overwhelmed him with imagery. I was astonished by the speed at which things happen in this fashion world; I was not prepared for that at all. At first, I primarily resorted to things that I had already made, but as the collection evolved, I made quite a lot of new work specifically for it.

Did you explore the work together with Kim and consciously choose to accompany those existing characters or motifs from the canvas to the clothes?
We went through a period of a good few months where I was constantly sending him images by text – probably bothering him immensely – and he would respond. If he didn’t, then I guessed he probably wasn’t interested, so I would send him something else and get a response, and there was this back and forth. He had already started looking at the silhouettes and the make up of my painting *Gasthof zur Muldentalsperre* in which there are these two figures, one wearing a Napoleonic soldier’s costume and the other a long smock coat like the coats worn by the Beaux-Arts students,

the long bright-coloured ones with the gold trim on the inside. Kim had already started sending me mock-ups using old theatrical costumes, cut up, and the beginnings of ideas using existing clothes that they had found or just adapted. It was very much like going back to the early 1980s when people found things at Laurence Corner[15] or theatrical shops and then adapted them. He had a starting point and then I was sort of adding to it, I guess. I was surprised at the first meeting how evolved it already was and how much had been done over the course of a couple of months, all that Alex Foxton, the head of tailoring, Edward Crutchley, director of fabrics and graphics, Janosch Mallwitz, the head of leatherware, Brian Moore, the knitwear developer, and footwear designer Thibault Denis had come up with in such a short time.

> **‘It was like going back to the early 1980s when people found things at Laurence Corner [army-surplus store] or theatrical shops and adapted them.’**

How did you and the teams approach translating your canvases to the clothes? What was the process? You obviously really enjoyed it.

I did enjoy it and I also realized just how hit and miss it is. There were so many experiments and trials that we cast aside. You start to realize what works in certain mediums and what doesn’t. You can turn almost anything into some photographic reproduction technique, but we wanted to use traditional silk screening in some cases and jacquards in others, but I found that if you try to reproduce a painting in embroidery, it loses something. It’s not the painting and it’s not an embroidery; it’s somewhere in between the two. The lion blanket was the one we decided to go all out on and they did an amazing job with that, but there were other things that ended up looking a bit like Grandma Moses’ version of my paintings, even though they already look a bit Grandma Moses sometimes![16]

Was there anything that you flatly refused to do?

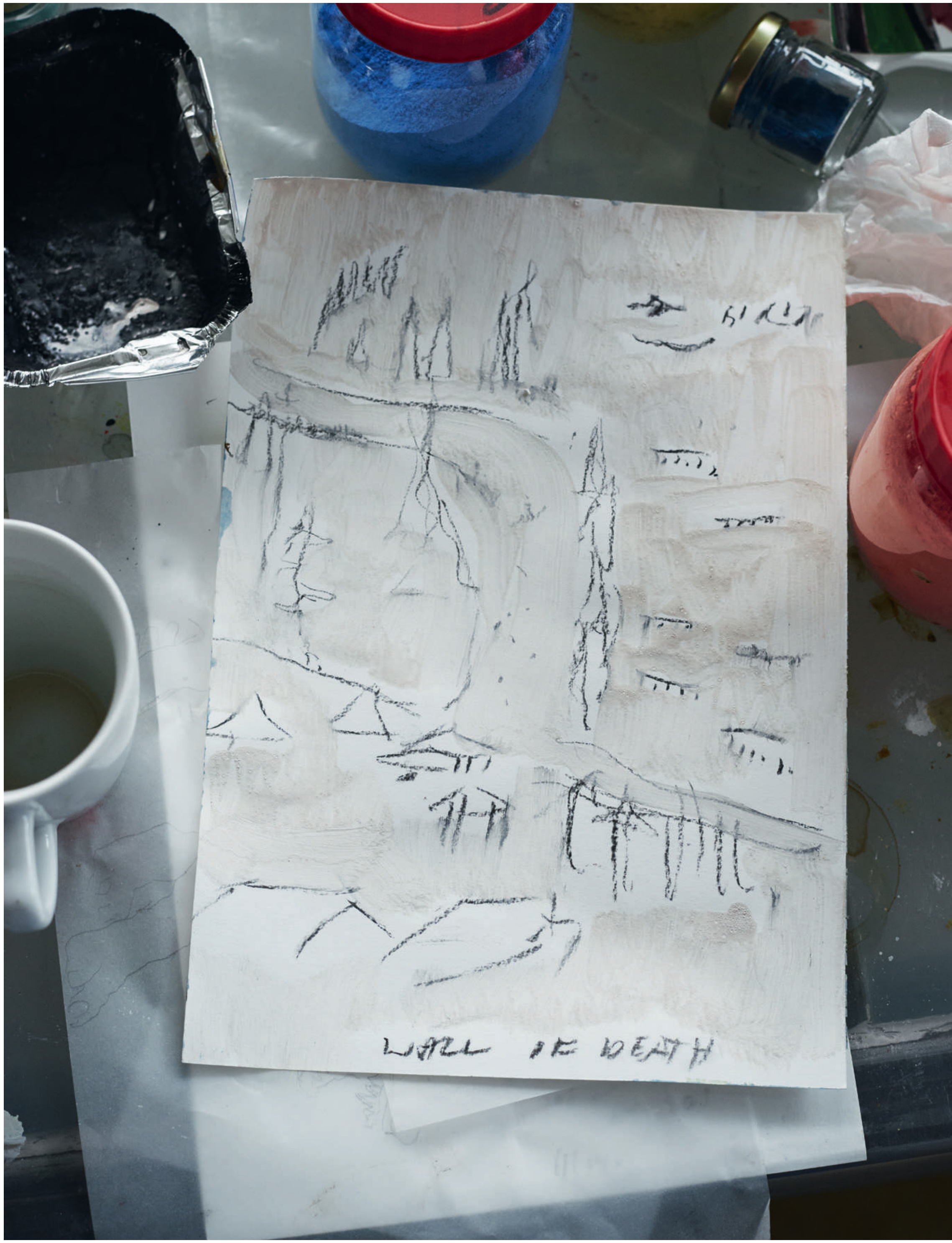
Some of the translations of the work bled into the comical. You have to be quite strict with yourself and that’s why when we did use imagery, we tried to interpret the paintings in a subtle restrained way. For instance, for the print of *Gasthof zur Muldentalsperre*, it became pure silhouettes, like a smoky silhouette, a ghost image, instead of going into all the detail. The details were in the clothes themselves, as well as the buttons, the insignia, the *passementerie*. One of Kim’s first collections used that same military reference, so I think that was something in his past and mine, and that’s maybe one of the reasons he was excited by it.

Was it satisfying working with Stephen Jones, who you knew back in the 1980s at Saint Martins? How did you experience this renewed friendship?

Stephen was always there; he was at all these meetings. He has been around a while and his opinions are very much respected. He has great knowledge of the archives and the history of Dior, so he is an incredible resource. He is also a brave and inventive designer, almost a sculptor really, and always encouraging and open. If it hadn’t been for him I would have been very nervous about putting brush to felt, but he was so enthusiastic about the idea and it felt like the experiment that it was. One of the first things I did when he suggested making these hand-painted hats was to Google ‘hand-painted hats’ and the results are the most hideous things you have ever seen in your life! So it was a challenge, and then for someone to put it on their head… Then I started to get more in tune with the idea of the show being an event, a masquerade, and the hats became maybe more playful than some of the other stuff we did.

It’s interesting you use the term ‘masquerade’, because I know Stephen came to see you in Venice over Christmas. Is that where the idea evolved or had you spoken about it before hand?

Stephen had already given me strips of felt and rabbit fur, and I had started experimenting with colour on them, just doing dots of colour. I found that using good quality powder pigment bound with rabbit glue – which is actually made from the skin of a rabbit and was a pre-Renaissance binding mechanism painters used to bind the pigment and place it on the canvas or wood – worked really well on the felt, because it is basically coming from the same animal. Then I had to come up with images for the hats. I didn’t want them to be purely painterly, but certain things were interesting. Like the black was so black that for a lot of the hats, I left the black as a kind of a void. Stephen sent me the ‘blanks’, which was this special bowler he had designed. It reminded me of those hats from the early 1980s, like Buffalo, like the Witches collection by McLaren and Westwood;[17] it certainly



Photography retouching: Stéphane Virlogeux.

wasn't like a businessman's bowler. It had this very interesting rim that looked as though it had been bent or chewed. As I got into painting them, I felt more liberated, enough to paint the brim and to actually slap the paint on and allow it to be caught by the shape of the hat. Stephen was incredibly enthusiastic about it and he came to Venice to collect the hats, which was special because this was during lockdown and Venice was pretty much empty; it was just a special time. I'm an artist who always works on his own – I've never had an assistant or anyone else in my studio – so to be invited to work with this group of people during lockdown especially was something I really enjoyed. I haven't found it easy to work during lockdown; I haven't relished all this lockdown-ness. I probably haven't been the most productive in my own work, so it felt like the right time to do something with someone else.

> **'You can turn almost anything into a photographic reproduction technique, but we wanted to use traditional silk screening and jacquards.'**

Moving on to the initial 'skiwear' influence you wanted to bring to the collection and the relationship with the town of Zermatt in Switzerland. How did you initially propose working with the team on those elements in the collection?

I thought – naively, I guess – that winterwear could naturally incorporate skiwear and winter jackets like the puffer-type or ski jacket. So I got excited by that idea and made quite a lot of work especially for that part. Then when I went to the first design meeting it became clear to me that I had kind of veered off at a tangent! Then I found out about Dior's 'ski capsule' collection, and Kim and the team asked whether they could use the ski ideas for that! It's almost like a separate collection.

Are you particularly interested in the style associated with skiing and mountaineering? It's often a theme in your work. I know that you've been particularly inspired by some of the archival films from the 1940s that Heinz Julen screens in his Zermatt restaurant.[18] These clothes have a really strong style.

I'm really interested in the history of skiing and the development of equipment. I have a particular passion for skiwear from the 1970s, my teenage years. I understood that we couldn't do something totally nostalgic, but there are definite references to particular brands and styles from that time in this capsule collection. I hope we are making a *toque*, a hat that was influenced by a climber's hat worn by Heinz's father, August, in one film.

Are you developing the new capsule collection from Zermatt, where you have also set up a painting studio and are preparing a show?

There are references to Zermatt in the paintings going into this collection. The Matterhorn does feature on a few of the garments and is something I am constantly thinking about. We're almost there now; it's being finalized. We're pretty close; it's not as big as the main collection. It's a small, concise collection, but something I'm particularly interested in as I'm an avid skier. I had my own personal preferences in mind when considering what was being made, thinking about the technical aspects of the garments and their functionality.

Tell me a bit more about Zermatt. Why does it have a particular magic for you as a place for both skiing and as a place to work?

Meeting Heinz Julen was very important for me. He is very much a man of Zermatt; his family is one of the oldest families there, and they are deeply entrenched in the community. He is also a self-taught artist and architect working in this landscape; it was really inspiring to meet someone like him. My children have become good friends with many of his relations, so it made our time in Zermatt particularly special. It was always my fantasy to be able to work in the mountains and ski. Skiing has been one of my great passions since I was a child. If I hadn't become an artist, I'd have wanted to become a ski bum. Then there's the setting: the Matterhorn has this incredible presence, unlike any peak in the world. It's just majestic. You never ever get tired of looking at it and it changes constantly. It's so far beyond the cliché when you are in its presence.

Zermatt represents such a contrast from your life and work in Trinidad, with its music, carnival, people and poetry. Did you also want to explore that particular culture in this collection? I'm particularly thinking about that marriage between your work and the poetry of Derek Walcott, the St Lucian poet, with whom you collaborated on the book *Morning, Paramin* that featured Alpine and tropical landscapes.

Even though it is a winter collection, there are a good number of references to my work that are very much out of Trinidad. Derek liberated those thoughts for me because in that book he talked about Switzerland and he talked about this switch where he imagined parts of Trinidad in the snow and almost like a Swiss village. He had really experienced both worlds or many worlds. He was able to reflect on those thoughts and those notions even when he was back in what was his own world, the Caribbean; he could bring these layers of experience and imagery.

You've long been involved with the local community in Trinidad, particularly Port of Spain. You've mentioned the idea of setting up a bursary or artistic scholarship with some of the money from this collaboration with Kim.

I'm going to put *all* the money into it. I want to set up a foundation that will allow young Trinidadian artists and designers to go and study abroad as part of an exchange. This partly comes from my own experiences of the 13 years I spent teaching in Düsseldorf: there were three students from Trinidad, who had all found it difficult to find the means to get there. They managed to duck and dive to do it, but it was really tough for them. The concept of studying abroad for many kids is just not an option really, unless they get what is called an 'island scholarship'[19] and they are generally not given to kids working in the arts. So my idea is to set up a foundation or a bursary fund for students looking to study fine arts, fashion, film abroad. Beyond that, I am just really interested in exchange; Chris Ofili, Lisa Brice and I all ended up in Trinidad on an exchange programme that sadly no longer exists. It was vital for us and many others.

> **'As an artist, if you work in another medium or context, if you do it right, it should feel part of your body of work, not something that's an aside.'**

Just swinging back, I wanted to talk about the show's set design and your relationship to its conception and execution, as well as the fact that it wasn't a live experience. We were talking before about the theatricality of the show and how that was very exciting for you, so how did you experience that transition from a live to a digital experience?

I got very excited at the idea of a 'presentation'. Kim came to my house and he saw these old 1950s cinema speakers I have and said maybe we could use these on the stage for the show? So I started doing sketches and drawings incorporating the speakers, imagining them in a landscape. In Trinidad, it is not uncommon to see huge speakers set up in a field next to a bar, for instance. So I started making drawings or thinking about collages, of stacks of speakers in a landscape. We used *Milky Way*, a painting of mine that was referred to a lot in the collection, as a backdrop. Often you'll see guys standing on speakers wearing certain clothes and striking a pose. So I had this idea that the catwalk could be on different levels; people could be standing on speakers; people could be walking in front of them, and it evolved from that. We started off with these two big European speakers in the centre as a sort of homage to music that we loved – we played Kraftwerk through them for the presentation.

And of course, these speakers were originally owned by Florian Schneider of Kraftwerk.

The original ones were, but for the stage show, we blew them up to more than twice their actual size. I gave the designers who produced the show, Villa Eugénie, images of speakers from my own paintings, so it became this amalgam of my real life and painted world. I was very nervous about seeing the stage set in real life because I had this horrible fear that it would be one of those *Spinal Tap* moments when you would go in and the scale would be completely wrong, but actually they got it absolutely right.[20] It was better than what I had imagined; they did an extraordinary job. The only sad thing is there was no live audience, but with the ongoing pandemic, that couldn't be avoided, alas.

What have you taken away from this experience and this collaboration? You talked about working with a close-knit team and also the fast pace of fashion and in particular collaborating with Kim and his team. Is this something that has made you approach your own work in a different way, or has it just been a wonderful parenthesis in that deep-time mode in which you work?

In the end, the way that I work, that is to make paintings, remains unchanged. It's a slow and solitary process, but what I can say is that I got a lot out of this collaboration with Kim and his team at Dior. As an artist, if you work in another medium or context, if you do it right, it should feel that it's somehow part of your body of work, not something that's an aside. It should be something that you can feel proud of and stand behind and that's how I feel when I reflect upon this collection.

1. In 1905, a group of writers and artists began meeting at the house of Vanessa Bell and her brother Thoby Stephen at 46 Gordon Square in Bloomsbury, London. The writers, including publisher Leonard Woolf (who married Vanessa's sister Virginia in 1912), writer Lytton Strachey, and economist John Maynard Keynes, would meet on Thursdays, while the artists, including Duncan Grant, John Nash, Henry Lamb and Edward Wadsworth, would meet on Fridays.

2. Trojan – born Gary Barnes in 1964 in Croydon – was a fashion icon, make-up artist and artist whose work played with questions of identity, the absurd and grotesque. Leigh Bowery's lover, and partner in legendary club night Taboo, Barnes died of a heroin overdose aged 22 in 1986.

3. Leigh Bowery was an Australian-born performance artist, fashion designer, club promotor (with Taboo), provocateur, and muse (notably sitting for Lucian Freud); he died of an AIDS-related illness aged 33 in 1994. Rachel Auburn trained and worked as a fashion designer (showing her work alongside Bowery at the legendary Susanne Bartsch-organized show in New York in 1984), and later became a DJ. Christopher Nemeth was a fashion designer whose aesthetic was based upon the use of recycled materials; in 1986, he moved to Tokyo where he had a successful career. He died aged 51 in 2010. The two shows that designer Stephen Linard put on at Saint Martins (*Neon Gothic*, 1980; *Reluctant Emigrés*, 1981) brought him overnight success. He later founded his own label and dressed musicians including David Bowie, Fun Boy 3 and the Pet Shop Boys. He can be found on Instagram at @stephen_linard95.

4. *Michael Clark: Cosmic Dancer*, a comprehensive exhibition about the celebrated British dancer and choreographer known for mixing classical dance with club culture, ran at the Barbican, London, from 7 October 2020 to 3 January 2021.

5. Larry Levan (1954-1992) was perhaps the first superstar DJ thanks to a 10-year residency at Paradise Garage in New York (1977-1987) and his wide-ranging style and taste, which produced what Pitchfork has described as a 'slippery, pliant, ecstatic sound'. He also produced artists including Gwen Guthrie, and made over 250 remixes before his death of heart failure aged 38.

6. Duggie Fields (1945-2021) was known for his 'maximalist' pop-art paintings and his extravagant personal style; he often claimed to see no difference between his art and his life. He can be seen playing Avarice in the video for the Pet Shop Boys' 1987 song 'It's a Sin'. Political activist, artist, journalist, and model Caroline Coon is known for co-founding Release, a help centre for people arrested on drug charges, in 1967 and for her sometimes controversial feminist art; her painting, *Mr. Olympia*, inspired by Manet's *Olympia*, was refused by Tate Liverpool as its subject had a semi-erect penis. While working as a journalist at British music weekly *Melody Maker* in the 1970s, Coon coined the term 'punk rock'.

7. Iain R. Webb is a fashion writer and academic who studied fashion at Saint Martins, graduating in 1980.

8. Dave's Coffee Bar, situated on the ground floor of Saint Martins' Charing Cross Road building, was a dingy café filled with broken sofas and chairs, Formica tables, and students.

9. David Harrison is a British artist. His gallery's website explains that his colourful and mystical 'paintings, drawings and sculptures present a world where the natural and supernatural go hand in hand'.

10. Fiona Dealey was a regular at the celebrated Blitz Club and with Richard Ostell made hats for the video for David Bowie's 1980 song, 'Ashes to Ashes'. She is now a costume designer; he is an interiors and furniture designer. Darla Jane Gilroy is a reader at the London College of Fashion and wore a dress of her own design in the 'Ashes to Ashes' video.

11. George O'Dowd is better known as Boy George, 1980s style icon, lead singer of Culture Club, and co-writer of *Taboo*, a 2002 musical about Leigh Bowery.

12. Zika Ascher, and his wife, Lida, left their native Czechoslovakia for London in 1939 and founded their textiles company Ascher in 1942. They began producing printed fabrics for many leading fashion houses, including Dior, Balenciaga, Lanvin and Yves Saint Laurent. The company also famously produced Squares, a series of silk scarves printed with designs by artists including Henry Moore, André Derain and Henri Matisse.

13. In 1930, a 21-year-old Francis Bacon was featured in *Creative Art* ('A Magazine of Fine & Applied Art') in a story entitled 'The 1930 Look in British Decoration'. It revealed that his apartment had been an 'uninspiring garage' until it was 'completely transformed' by the 'young English decorator'. The magazine was most impressed with Bacon's rugs: 'particularly representative of to-day … their inspiration springs from nothing Oriental or traditional – they are purely thought forms.'

14. Soizic Pfaff has worked at Dior since 1974 and has been in charge of the Dior Héritage, the house's archives since 1985.

15. For over 50 years until its closure in 2007, Laurence Corner in Euston was a legendary army-surplus and costume store. It is said that the shop provided the Beatles with the military costumes they wore on the cover of *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. The shop space is now a pharmacy.

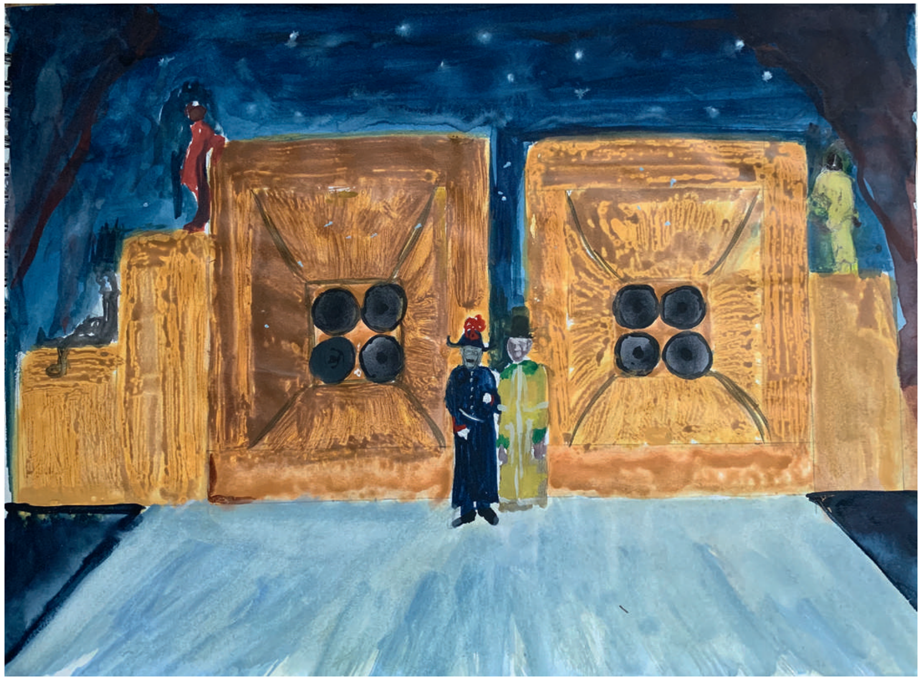
16. Anna Mary Robertson Moses (1860-1961) was an American folk artist who began painting when arthritis stopped her embroidering aged 78. In 1939, an art collector bought a selection of her idealized scenes of rural life and three were soon afterwards included in a show entitled *Contemporary Unknown Painter*s at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Despite her late start, Grandma Moses – as she became known – produced over 2,000 paintings before her death aged 101.

17. Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren's Autumn/Winter 1983-1984 *Witches* collection was the duo's final collaboration for their label World's End; it featured prints by Keith Haring who McLaren had met in New York while making his album *Duck Rock*.

18. Described on his website as a 'rare kind of person', Heinz Julen is an artist, architect, designer, hotelier and restaurant owner based in Zermatt. He was named after one of his father's friends, a member of the Heinz family renowned for its ketchup and beans.

19. The Trinidad and Tobago government offers island scholarships to allow students to study abroad. In November 2020, the number of annual scholarships was cut from 400 to 100 due to budgetary restraints.

20. In the 1984 rock mockumentary *This Is Spinal Tap*, lead guitarist Nigel Tufnel orders a replica of ancient British monument Stonehenge for the band's stage show. Unfortunately, he writes down the wrong measurements on his plan so that instead of being over 5 metres high, the model that descends onto the stage during the group's song 'Stonehenge' is, as the lead singer observes, 'in danger of being crushed by a dwarf'.



Page 127: *Young Skier Zermatt*, pigment on paper, 2021
Page 128: *Alpiniste Zermatt*, pigment and watercolour on paper, 2021
Page 131: *Wall of Death*, pigment and charcoal on paper, 2021
This page: *Speakers/Stage*, pigment and watercolour on paper, 2020

‘If he’s down, I’m up; if he’s up, I can be down.’

Italian duo Sunnei are the fiercely non-Milanese brand from Milan with the kindergarten-for-adults aesthetic.

Interview by Angelo Flaccavento
Photographs by Andrea Artemisio

SIMONE
LORIS

I first met Simone Rizzo and Loris Messina in spring 2015 after being intrigued by a bunch of boldly striped *combinaisons* I had seen online. At that time, their label Sunnei was barely a year old and nobody in Milan knew that it was based in the city. Today, it remains fiercely non-Milanese in its kindergarten-for-adults aesthetic – the closest comparison being Marni's rave-y heyday – and even correctly pronouncing its name is still a challenge. (Quick lesson: it's *sunny*, but pronounced how an Italian pretending to speak good English would say it, *sunn-hey*.) Loris and Simone – the two kids whose angel faces and small frames put them in the 'forever young' category of adults – immediately struck me with their focus and determination. Their neophyte status and lack of professional training that distanced them from any 'young designer' cliché also reinforced that first good impression. It was clear that they were more interested in building a brand that could be a cultural and creative container rather than producing anything remotely trendy. In devising simple, yet playful clothes that they themselves wanted to wear, and communicating about them with a certain sardonic wit, Rizzo and Massina soon attracted a transversal, international coterie of like-minded peers, most of them *non*-fashion.

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Since that first meeting, I've chatted with the pair regularly and watched as Sunnei has grown both its reputation and its business. In September 2020, that initial success was confirmed with a €6 million investment by Vanguards, the fashion and lifestyle investment fund co-founded by Nanushka chief executive Peter Baldaszti. The cash injection has given Sunnei room to grow, yet the more this happens, the more the designers cling to their outsider status. Proud of their highly idiosyncratic approach to business, Loris and Simone like to do things the wrong way, which has clearly hit a nerve. In its new headquarters in the calm Città Studi area of Milan, Sunnei is even more isolated from the local fashion scene than before. Even after meeting Loris and Simone so many times, I still can't quite decide if they're mean or nice, but I'm absolutely certain of one thing: they know exactly where they're going.

Angelo Flaccavento: How did Sunnei come into being?

Simone Rizzo: It was kind of a swerve. We were fresh out of university, doing little jobs here and there. Loris was at Gucci; I had worked as a buyer for a couple of years. We said, 'Let's do something that's ours' – but we had no idea how to go about it.

Loris Messina: It was spontaneous and uncomplicated. In the beginning, the only question we asked ourselves was: 'Why are there new brands everywhere except Italy?' Something was really missing in menswear.

Simone: We decided to behave as if Sunnei had always existed, so if someone saw it for the first time, they would think that it has always been around. We started shooting with friends, like [photographer] Andrea Artemisio; luckily, they became big names in the creative world. The trouble was, we had no idea how to make clothes.

How did you build a brand that anyone can wear without the training that most fashion designers go through?

Loris: Intuition. Our first concepts were really basic. We wanted to make a white shirt, so we made one. We said, let's do a denim one, and we did, although I didn't even know how denim was structured. That's how we began. We didn't even know what cutting shears were. The collections arose out of what we wanted to wear at that point, what we wanted cool people to be wearing.

My impression is that, at least at first, fashion with a capital F wasn't your main goal.

Simone: We launched ourselves into making clothes without having rules. Other designers were shocked by the crudeness. After a few years, we realized that we'd been lucky to start off knowing nothing. We didn't know the rules, so we weren't subject to strictures.

When did you understand Sunnei's potential for bringing people together?

Simone: We did an event during the 2016 Salone Mobile with *Apartamento* magazine, and suddenly everyone was there – Max Lamb, Sabine Marcelis – and everyone told us, 'You're our reference point.' How did that happen? We weren't a deliberate community; it was just our circle of friends. We weren't *milanesi* from Milan. The truth is that in Milan we've always been in our own world.

Do you deliberately distance yourselves from the Milan fashion system?

Simone: Yes, because it's these never-ending discussions about what is the story, what is beautiful. We weren't interested. For the first three years, we worked hard on our ideas. We didn't get much feedback, but we were OK with that because we'd met people we were totally at ease with, who were interesting, and, increasingly, business focused.

Loris: We had conviction in what we were doing because we had validation, like when Opening Ceremony bought our second season right off the bat. We said no a lot, too. There were projects coming from the commercial fashion world, but they made no sense to us.

Proud of their highly idiosyncratic approach to business, Loris and Simone like to do things the wrong way, which has clearly hit a nerve.

In this system, sometimes whoever is helping you out gets more attention than you do.

Loris: We wanted to focus exclusively on what we were doing. You have to have total conviction in your own ideas. And of course, there are two of us, so we complement each other.

Simone: If he's down, I'm up; if he's up, I can be down.

What's the work dynamic between you two? Do you have roles? One of you is the creative, one is the strategist?

Simone: Loris is mega-rational, sophisticated; he sees beyond the moment. Whereas me, I'm, I don't really know... I'm more spiritual, more communicative, more open; he is more closed off. But over the years we've found a good balance. I'm much more commercially minded. We can be in the same room, look at the same thing, and he sees it from one angle, me from another, and we find ourselves in the middle.

So how did you arrive at your particular design language? Because there is one: the stripes, the precise rhythm, the use of colour, the shapes that never cling to the body…

Loris: We became aware of it, knowingly, probably only in the past year.

Simone: We were using fabric that was pretty rough. We never asked for the best fabric of the season, because we liked taking the less fine fabric and making it move differently, in a way that didn't match its product category. We've worked really hard on how to communicate the brand through the clothes.

When we met in 2015, you were a brand doing blue-and-white stripes. You then created a space in which people were doing other things, too. It feels like that happened when you started to form a Sunnei community around you.

Simone: We work on a series of projects, all under the Sunnei umbrella. Like re-doing a space under a bridge or basic T-shirts with what we think is the perfect fit. It's all projects that our friends have done with us. Maybe we've created a sort of bubble and inside there are all these ingredients.

I thought the Spring/Summer 2021 *Canvas* collection was a turning point. It had a language of form that was entirely yours, with its extreme simplicity. The consumer could play with patterns. That's very Sunnei: pieces of a puzzle that you can put together any way you like. What draws you into a project? What convinces you to do it?

Simone: For us, if the concept coincides perfectly with the commercial side – that's it. We have to communicate simply, without putting people off with high-concept. We never want to become self-congratulatory or obnoxious. We want to mine every concept to its depths, but if it isn't being expressed clearly, then it won't happen. About six years ago, we started to communicate on social media. Instagram back then wasn't as huge, and we did things that were simple, unrefined. I don't want to sound like we're boasting, but over time we created an Instagram language: simplicity, irony, knowingness, speed, rhythm. Online you don't have to be hip, but you have to be real. If not, you ruin everything. Nothing we've ever done online has been inauthentic. We focused all our activity on getting an organic result. Trying to have loads of followers is something that has destroyed lots of brands. We never spent a cent on that. We never over-communicated; we didn't do anything that didn't interest us 100%. And today we have a fan-base that is hugely powerful. We have created a genuine community.

Loris: We're not unique; there's a whole generation who have used it in the way it should be used. It was just the best tool for us and we used it at the right time.

Simone: That's really the foundation of our relationship, professional and personal. If it happens, great; if it happens immediately, even better. If it happens five years later, but it's the right time, great. There's no need to switch on the accelerator when it's not needed.

How would you define the Sunnei image? The clothes aren't for seduction or to indicate status. It's really hard to describe what's happening on

the runway using the usual narrative tools of the reporter. The classical references aren't there.
Simone: You've described it well! What was it? 'Magic with a commercial push.' I wouldn't know how to describe it.

Do you always start with a concept for a collection?
Simone: We start with words, images, all around a table. We bring our stuff, our ideas, things we've found. Sunnei is like an iPhone: every new season, there are new updates. We've always been on the outside of trends, outside politics. That's why the clothes themselves don't have a shape; they take on the shape of the person wearing them. When we started doing womenswear, we knew right from the off that we'd put the menswear collection on women.

> **'Other designers were shocked by the crudeness. But we realized that we'd been lucky to start off knowing nothing – we weren't subject to strictures.'**

Humour or irony is one way to interpret your work. In fact, you tread a fine line between being nice and not being nice. You said backstage a few years ago, 'We don't have to be the nice ones.'
Simone: We're mean, but with a smile, or maybe we're nice but don't smile much.
Loris: I think mean with a smile is more accurate.

Since Vanguards bought a majority stake, have you felt the need to mature, to change your approach?
Simone: Not at all. Vanguards understood that they could rely on us. We were looking for someone who understood why Sunnei works, the kids who are Sunnei's DNA, the whole equilibrium. Our partnership is based on mutual trust. We were in charge of our finances, but now we trust them on that, and they trust us with the creativity, the operations, the strategy. We wanted our team to feel secure and be autonomous, not second-guessing things because they have to budget.

How many people in your team have been working with you for years?
Simone: Our staff turnover is tiny. Riccardo and Giulia have been with us forever, for five years. Giulia is the face of Sunnei to the world. At the beginning there were just the four of us and we did everything together; we'd go to Paris and all stay in one room.
Loris: It was their first job and they felt a real bond because of that. Then Mirko came, he was 21; then Maria, who I met when we were doing a show because she was doing social-media content. We saw that she was the eye we needed on everything social. Maria is so sought-after by all the big houses.
Simone: She tracks Instagram, Weibo. She was born to do this job. Mirko has curated all the imagery, all the commerce. All of them came here as kids. They weren't cool when they arrived. We'd say, 'Come to this event', and they'd be like, 'No, no'. They went home to read or to get pizza with each other.

Milan has so many cliques: the same people taking gossip from one design department to another; it's that chit-chat that makes Milan so provincial. But you are in your own province.
Simone: Yes, a special state. We'd really love to be on Neptune. I remember an intern saying: 'You have created in Milan something that could exist anywhere, but which didn't exist here.'

There is this sense that you are snobs, that you refuse to play the game.
Loris: It's just that we are free. If we don't want to do something, we won't.

You've made unpopular decisions, like a runway show at 8pm on a Sunday night or a 2pm show during a summer heatwave at the far end of town…
Simone: When the press offices told us we couldn't do it, we said, 'Look, no one *has* to come.' Angelo, you've always been really kind to us with your reviews. It was great that in September there were only 100 of you. When the press office told us there was a diplomatic crisis, that people wanted to come, but we hadn't invited them, we thought, 'Why would they come to our show if we don't know them?' Anyway, you've seen how we are before our shows.

Totally wrecked.
Simone: Yeah, because we pull the collection together the night before. We'd be in the atelier, right up to last season. We've always been hands-on, just like it was us who spent a year negotiating with backers.
Loris: Until Spring/Summer 2021, we were present. It's not just the runway, you have to think of distribution, sales campaigns…
Simone: Playing a grown-up game.
Loris: But we weren't grown-ups.
Simone: And finally, last January, we said, 'Enough.' The more you have, the more you want, the more you do, but this moment feels more concrete.
Loris: Concrete, yes. Even when everything stopped around us, we didn't want to stop. Now, it's different; we're more serene. It's what we needed.

BIANCO SUNNEI

Located in the north-east Rubattino green area, Bianco Sunnei is the result of an urban regeneration project in the outskirts of Milano. The total-white 4000 sqm space was inaugurated as the venue of the brand's Spring Summer 2020 show and it will get back to host SUNNEI's cross-field activities in the next future.

EVERYDAY I ________________ SUNNEI

EVERYDAY I __________ SUNNEI

“EVERYDAY I WEAR SUNNEI” is one of the most emblematic mottos of SUNNEI because it encapsulates the idea that SUNNEI is more than just a label.
“EVERYDAY I __________ SUNNEI” means that everyone can feel it and be SUNNEI in the form they pick.

‘At this school we explore fashion as a huge, muddy stream.’

Will the next great Japanese designer come from Coconogacco fashion school?

Pentel ぺんてる
YKK ap

Interviews by Jun Ishida
Photographs by Takashi Homma

Avant-garde Japanese design has been an essential component of the global fashion ecosystem since the late 1970s, thanks to the likes of Yohji Yamamoto, Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, Junya Watanabe and Jun Takahashi. Today, in a neighbourhood of clothing wholesalers in east Tokyo, a fashion school called Coconogacco is building on that legacy. Founded in 2008 by Yoshikazu Yamagata – an alumnus of Central Saint Martins in London who worked for John Galliano in Paris before returning to Japan to launch fashion brand Writtenafterwards – the school has a mission to create a fashion culture and a creative environment that helps each designer achieve his or her own, unique vision. It's a desire encapsulated in the very name: a play on words meaning both 'school of the individual' and 'school right here'.

In its 13-year history, Coconogacco has produced more than 1,000 graduates, including Tomo Koizumi, who debuted at New York Fashion Week in 2019 and was selected as a finalist for the 2020 LVMH Prize, and Akiko Aoki, who was nominated for the 2018 LVMH Prize and won the Mainichi Fashion Grand Prix Newcomer Award, one of Japan's most prestigious fashion awards.

At present, about 100 students attend classes every Saturday at Coconogacco. Yamagata participates in every class, bringing his experience both as a teacher and award-winning designer (in 2015, he was the first Japanese creative to be nominated for the LVMH Prize). *System* spoke to Yamagata about his motivation for founding the school and why it produces so many promising designers, before asking some of the current students: 'What makes Coconogacco unique?'

Jun Ishida: When did you start becoming interested in fashion?
Yoshikazu Yamagata: It began in middle school. I wasn't good at studying or communicating with others, so I had this huge complex. My interest in fashion grew gradually as I figured out how to hide that complex, or rather, how to dress to feel more confident. It wasn't until I was in high school that I really got into it.

When did you start thinking about becoming a fashion designer?
I started to think fashion designers were cool in high school. I was born and raised in the countryside; there was no place around me where I could buy fashionable clothes.[1] Instead, I started reading magazines and recording TV shows about fashion, watching them over and over again. The designers were so cool when they appeared on the runway at the ends of their shows; I admired them. At that time I still lacked self-confidence, so even when I began at fashion school I chose the fashion-business course instead of the design course. I even chose a school in Osaka instead of the one in Tokyo where I really wanted to go.

'The Japanese saying *i shoku ju* – clothing, food, shelter – that describes the necessities for life, begins with *i* or 'clothing'. I don't think that's a coincidence.'

You said you lacked self-confidence, but you still made the decision to leave Osaka to study at Central Saint Martins in London. What prompted that decision?
Something didn't feel right at the school I was in, so I dropped out after one year and decided to go to a language school in London, without any clear idea of how to go on from there. Then I started to think about what I really wanted to do, and that led to the decision to try out for Central Saint Martins.

How were classes at Central Saint Martins?
I started with a short two-month course and then took a one-year foundation course, where I studied not only fashion, but also art, architecture, and design in general. Then I went on to study in the degree programme for fashion, but it was very loose. [Laughs] You receive a briefing for the assignment and then you're left on your own to make something. You do get a few chances to talk to the professor before presenting, but there was never any pressure.

Was it different from Japanese schools?
In Japan, there are a lot of classes and mainly technical things are taught. In Central Saint Martins, there is almost no teaching of technique; it's mostly about making students think. The students already have a certain amount of knowledge and they are highly motivated, so the laissez-faire approach works well.

What was the thing you learned at Central Saint Martins that has influenced you the most?
The atmosphere of freedom. The school was creating things with such a free spirit, and that atmosphere was directly connected with fashion. This direct connection is something that I didn't quite feel in the school I attended in Japan.

During your time studying abroad, you went to Paris and worked for designers, including John Galliano. What did you learn from him?
I think Galliano is probably the designer who has influenced me the most. For him, anything goes. All materials are of equal value, and he can turn what people consider cheap or trashy into something full of potential. He also had the ability to come up with what is best for a particular moment in time. It really was amazing.

After returning from London in 2005, you founded Writtenafterwards in 2007 and Coconogacco the following year. The school and Writtenafterwards share a similar idea that you've described as: 'Building a new relationship between people and fashion through dialogue with their hearts. Fashion is not the design of clothes, but the design of human processes and trends; it is a communication tool.' How did both the label and school come about?
The concept of Writtenafterwards is something I had thought about since my days at Central Saint Martins. I was interested in the histories and stories behind people's various outfits and how they came to be. That's how the concept was born, and it certainly has a lot in common with the school. People often say that what we're doing with the brand and the school are two different things, but what we want to do is actually the same: to convey what I call the 'endearing sweetness of dressing up'.

What do you mean by that?
It's endearing that people wear clothes and dress up, and that we do that

Coconogacco founder and director
Yoshikazu Yamagata

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unconsciously as a species. A person’s humanity oozes out in the way he or she wears clothes.

What kind of school did you want to create when you started Coconogacco?
When I returned to Japan, I was asked to give a lecture at a fashion school. I talked to the students there and felt that some had had the same kinds of concerns as I had had: they were studying fashion, but were still wondering if the school they were attending was somewhere they could actually learn about the latest fashion. That’s when I decided to become someone who passed on my knowledge of contemporary fashion. Also, in Japan’s educational environment, it was difficult for students to know exactly what they needed to learn in order to become a fashion designer, so I wanted to communicate that as well.

> **‘There are many things that slipped away as Japan and Asia adopted a culture of Western clothing. The school consciously picks up on these things.’**

Did you find that the fashion education field had changed much since you’d left Japan?
The reason I left and the reason I started this school when I returned are the same. I was always a low achiever in school, and even when I went to a fashion school in Japan, I was one of the less able students. In London, I was able to enrol at a school where people who wanted to study fashion had come from all over the world. The whole value system was completely different from that in Japan. I wondered where this difference came from, and from there I became interested in the educational environment. I began to do a lot of my own research and visited schools in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Italy. Experiencing those different cultural backgrounds and styles of education meant I could look at Japan’s educational environment from a wider perspective when I returned.

What differences did you see in the value systems between Japanese and European schools?
Western clothes are the norm today, but it is actually a culture that only really took off in Japan after the Meiji era; the history of these clothes in Japan is very brief.[2] After the Meiji era, places to teach fashion were established, starting with bridal training schools, followed by sewing schools, and then vocational schools. What was taught first and foremost was how clothes were made and the necessary techniques, and so that became the basis of fashion education in Japan. On the other hand, many schools in Europe, especially those that produce designers, are affiliated with art universities. That means that they hold to artistic values that put an emphasis on conceptual thinking. For example, in Japan, if there was an assignment to make a skirt, the first step would be to learn how to make an A-line skirt, but in Europe, you would start by questioning the very concept of a skirt, which creates the possibility of designing something unprecedented. Of course, in Japan you have the advantage of being able to learn the techniques; the country is very advanced in terms of fashion-related archival activities, and there is a lot of passion and interest in doing research. I thought it would be great if students could have a choice between the two approaches, by helping them understand the differences between Japan and Europe, and at the time, there was nowhere they could learn that.

The names of Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto and Issey Miyake come to mind when discussing any dismantling of the concept of fashion. Do you think this is a characteristic of those Japanese designers who gain international acclaim?
Kawakubo-san and Yohji-san are graduates of Keio University, and Miyake-san is a graduate of Tama Art University. In my opinion, one of the reasons for their success is that they were able to combine a strong liberal-arts background with something more specialized. Kawakubo-san and Yohji-san also went to Setsu Mode Seminar, the art school founded by illustrator Setsu Nagasawa[3] and known for its free-spirited approach. I think it’s important to have the kind of eclectic quality that they have at Setsu, and in some ways we try to be like that today.

What do you mean by eclectic quality?
I never attended Setsu Mode Seminar, but I was told that Setsu-san would just be there, without teaching anything in particular, and that people of all ages and types would gather, attracted by the atmosphere. It was a meeting point where people from all walks of life could come and go; I wanted to recreate that feeling. To help students get onto the international stage, they need to learn about the differences in history, politics, culture and thought between the West and the East. So, in our school,

they first learn about their own position as a Japanese person and then conduct research on their own roots. The more they learn about their roots, as well as their problems, complexes, and unconscious habits, the more they are able to make links with current social issues, and the stronger their work becomes.

What kind of techniques do you use to encourage that process?
Our students all conduct independent, self-directed research and then we also make time for them to discuss work with each other. As they actively share the production process, they come to understand the differences between themselves and others. In the field of education, teachers tend to make assumptions about students and instil old values and hierarchies, but I think that believing in the potential of all students is the most important thing. We also invite people from other fields, such as philosophy, linguistics and physics, to give critiques and tutorials, so that we are not confined to fashion alone. For example, we once invited a Noh actor to give a lecture.[4] Noh costumes are made up of large, overlapping, flat surfaces, and by learning how these volumes move with the body, students could sense that Japanese clothing has emerged from a different background to Western clothing. There are many things that slipped away, as Japan and Asia adopted a culture of Western clothing. I want to pick up on these things and not overlook them. It's no use doing the same thing as in Western schools; I'm always conscious of the things that can only be learned here.

The school has several courses. Could you describe them?
The main courses are the primary and advanced courses. The primary course, as the name suggests, teaches the basic elements, starting with the breadth of fashion expression. It consists of lectures, assignments and workshops, and the content of the classes is broad, from making materials to taking photographs, thinking about concepts, and spatial expression. The goal of the advanced course is to create a final piece of work, but it can be anything students want to make; it really doesn't have to be fashion. The most important thing is that the students find the one thing they really want to do, so it can happen that someone who starts out wanting to make clothes ends up doing dance.

What kind of students attend the school?
Students come from many different backgrounds. Their age varies, from teenagers to people in their eighties, and they work in diverse fields. They all come to us because they want to combine their work with fashion. After studying at the school, some of them return to their own jobs.

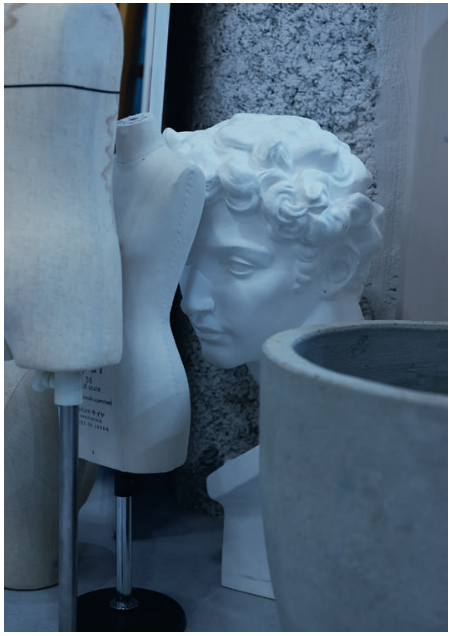
It must take a lot of energy to run a school, while also running your own label. How do you manage to sustain your passion for both?
I don't really know. At the root of it all is my own wish for fashion to be properly passed on. I might often think that fashion is superficial, but it has always been a part of human history. The Japanese expression *i shoku ju* – clothing, food, shelter – that describes the necessities for life, begins with *i* or 'clothing', and I don't think that's a coincidence. As a scholar once told me: 'We can survive without a place to live, and we can go on without food for a few days. But if you are naked, depending on the environment, you could die within a day. Clothing is crucial for protecting life.'

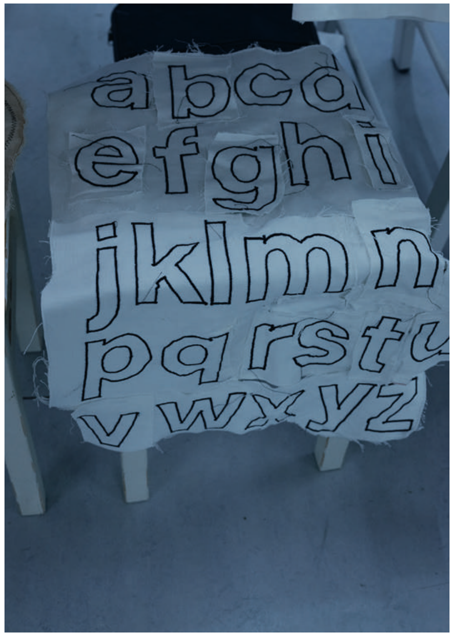
Are you influenced by the school and the students?
Of course. I have a lot of respect for my students. Being constantly in this environment, I naturally come into contact with contemporary fashion, which allows me to work with it without it feeling strange.

Have the significant digital advances in recent years brought about any changes within the school?
The Covid-19 crisis has led us to begin incorporating digital elements into the classes, although it is still a process of trial and error. We don't actively teach about digital forms of expression; I just introduce it as a possibility. I think it would be interesting if something were to come out of it, and if a student created a digital work instead of an actual object.

What other changes did the pandemic bring about?
We usually hold annual student presentations in Tokyo, but this year we are thinking of doing it somewhere more provincial. There has been talk of holding Lidewij Edelkoort's next World Hope Forum in Japan, so we are thinking of hosting the Forum and the

> **'Coconogacco isn't limited to Tokyo. I used to run a branch school in Fukuoka once a month. The venue could be a temple, a beach house or a farmhouse.'**





presentations in Yamanashi Prefecture and streaming them worldwide.[5] Yamanashi is home to many artisans and is rich in nature, and I would like the presentations to reflect the unique qualities of the place.[6] The crisis has created physical distance, but in presentations based on online platforms, the value of physical distance has changed; there is now more equality of access, and it is easier to shine a spotlight on remote and unexplored areas. The school itself doesn't have to be limited to Tokyo, either. I used to run a branch school in Fukuoka once a month, with fewer than 10 students and at a different location each time. The venue could be a temple, a beach house or a farmhouse. We set up chairs in these places and brought the students' works for critique. A change of location changes the way you think, and by doing something that has seemingly nothing to do with fashion – at the farmhouse, we even dug potatoes – you come to see how these things do, in fact, connect back to fashion. This is my ideal method of education.

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1. Yoshikazu Yamagata was born in 1980 in Tottori Prefecture, the country's least populous prefecture. Located on the coast in the south of the main island Honshu, it is best-known as home to Japan's largest sand dunes and the nearby Sand Museum, which displays large-scale sand sculptures by leading artists from around the world.

2. The Meiji era began in 1868 with the return of imperial rule, under Emperor Meiji, and is known for a sustained period of rapid modernization, industrialization and Westernization. It ended with the emperor's death in 1912.

3. Born in Fukushima Prefecture in 1917, Setsu Nagasawa was an illustrator, painter, designer, and fashion and film critic. He published his fashion illustration in magazines such as *Himawari* and in 1954 founded the painting classes that became the renowned Setsu Mode Seminar. In 1967, he held a now infamous unisex fashion show for which he put the men in skirts. In 1999, he fell off his bicycle, injuring his head; he died shortly afterwards.

4. Noh is a traditional Japanese all-male theatrical form that combines music, dance and drama. Noh plays feature slow formal movement, poetic language, characters defined by elaborate masks, and rich, multilayered and bulky costumes.

5. Launched in April 2020 by cultural forecaster Lidewij Edelkoort and design consultant Philip Fimmano, the World Hope Forum is aimed at 'designers, industry leaders, lifestyle companies, the public at large, and a growing number of creative amateurs' and 'will bring together speakers and selected case studies, good practices, retail reinventions and innovative ideas that will sprout in the spring of revival'. The date of the inaugural event has yet to be announced.

6. Yamanashi Prefecture is known for its natural beauty, including Mount Fuji, Japan's highest mountain (and an active volcano), peach and cherry orchards, vineyards, and pure spring water used in sake and whisky production. It is also the traditional home of Japanese crystal mining, an activity believed to date back to at least 14,000 BCE.

‘My country Myanmar is currently undergoing a coup d’état. I asked my mum to send me my childhood bedsheets, curtains, and traditional clothes, so I could turn these ‘ordinary’ items of sentimental value into something special, to create a sense of nostalgia for the peaceful times we had.’

Yang Han

Yang Han, 26

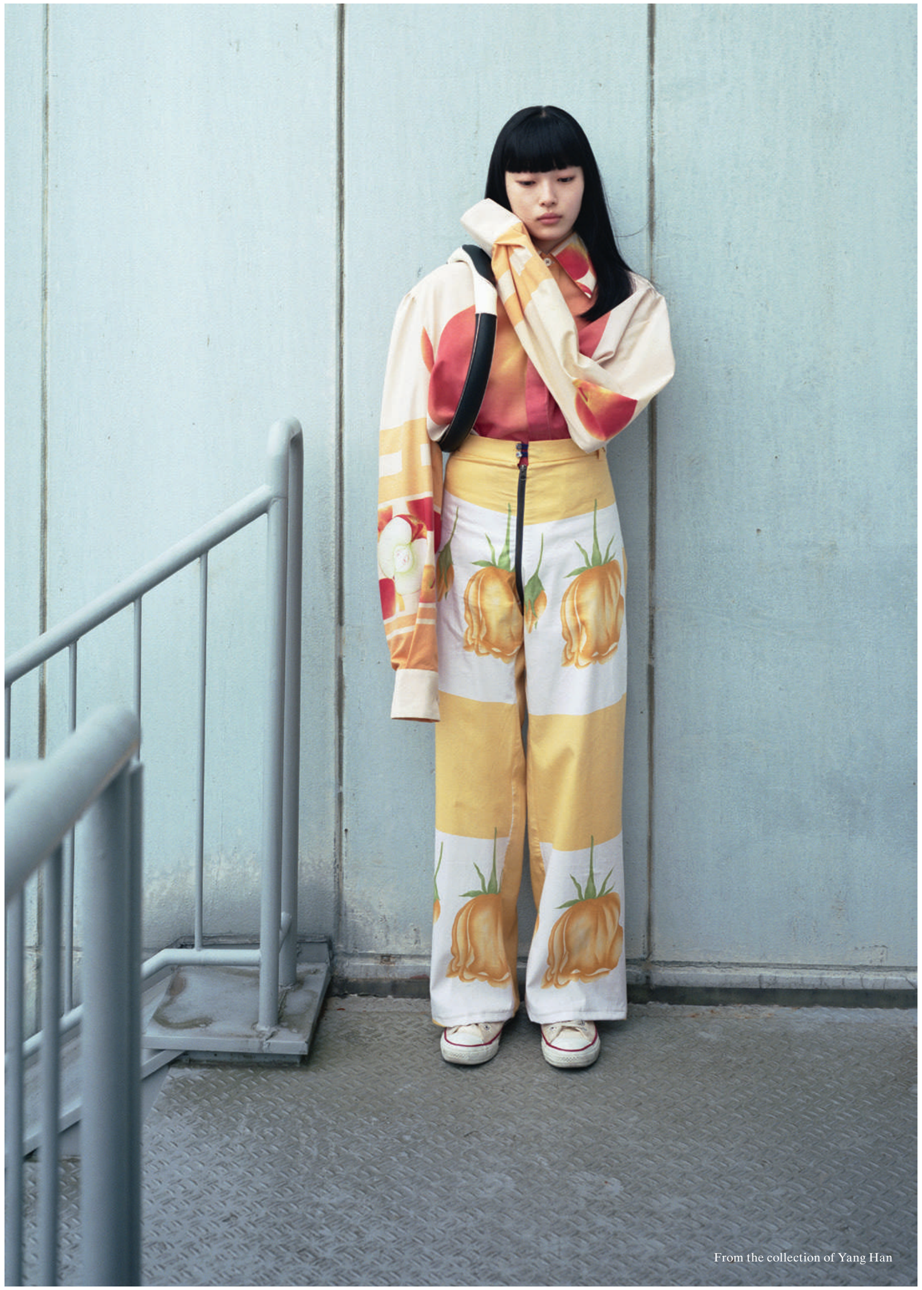
Tell us about your collection.
It started when I was exploring my roots, which I did by collecting pictures and asking my family questions, since I couldn’t go back to my homeland, Myanmar, because of the coronavirus crisis. I asked my mum to take pictures of our home – like my room, living room, dining room – then to send me some of my childhood bedsheets, curtains, and traditional clothes. My aim is to turn these ‘ordinary’ items of sentimental value into something special and so create a sense of nostalgia for the peaceful times we had, but which are now being threatened. Right now, my country is undergoing a coup d’état.

What’s the best thing about Coconogacco?
That I can be my truest self, and meet people from all walks of life.

Which person in fashion do you most admire, and why?
It has to be Leigh Bowery. He taught me to dare to be myself, and was a source of mental support at a time when I couldn’t find that from anyone else.

What do you think a younger designer like yourself can express to the world through fashion that a designer from an older generation could not?
As a Burmese person, I believe it would be a political statement. If done wrong, the older generation would get into trouble, even be sent to jail, but now, with social-media networks, we young designers can express whatever we want.

Where do you want to be professionally in five years’ time?
My aim is to assemble a small team, start my own brand, and have some impact on my country’s fashion scene.



From the collection of Yang Han

From the collection of Yang Han

> **‘Right now, my inspirations are the robot special effects I used to see on TV when I was a child. I created this piece with the intention of wearing it myself.’**
>
> **Karu Miyoshi**

Karu Miyoshi, 25

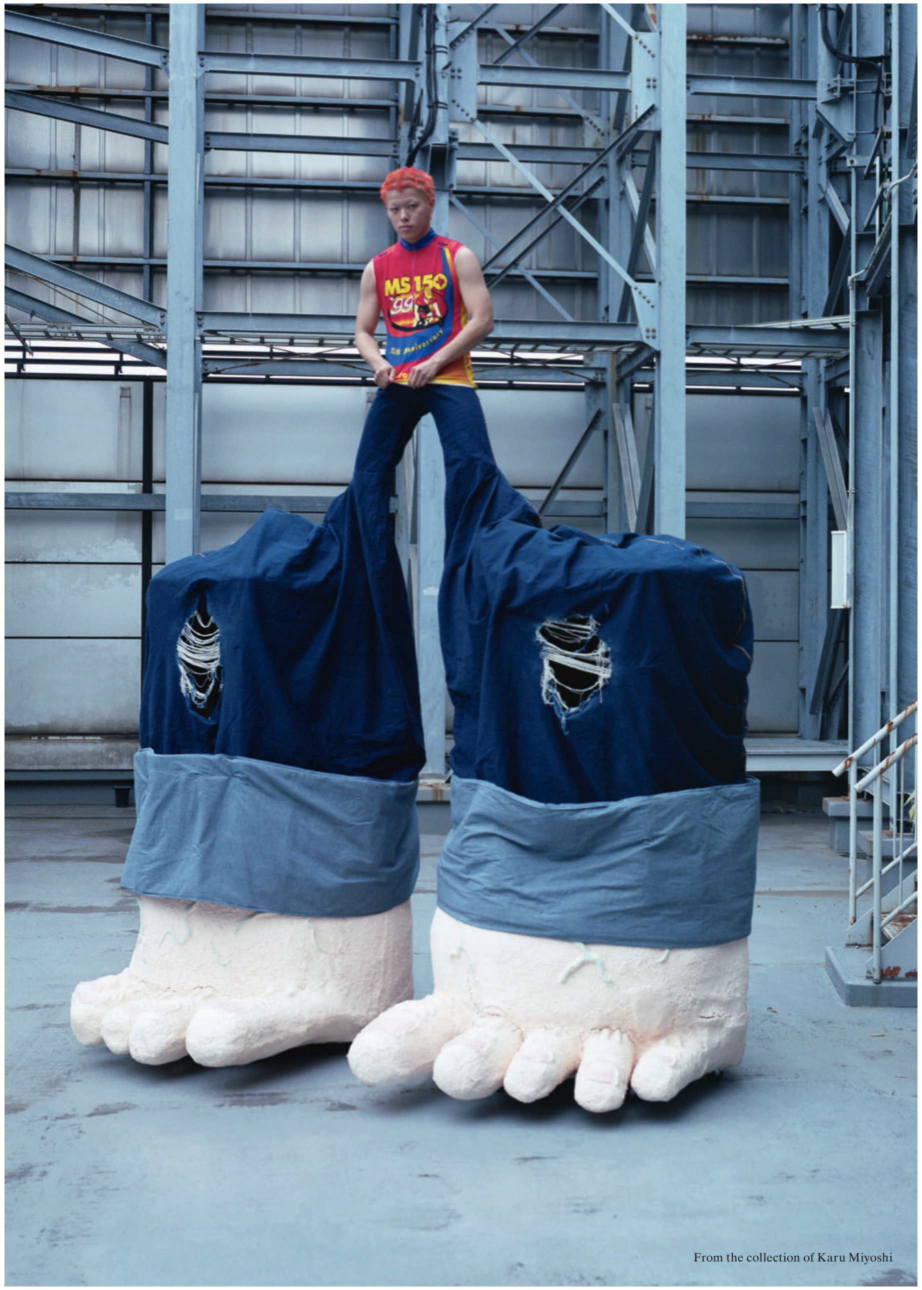
Tell us about your collection.
My inspirations are the robot special effects I would see on TV when I was a child. My visual references are animé, Finn’s magically enlarged legs on [cartoon series] *Adventure Time*, and the plump legs seen in *ukiyo-e* [traditional woodblock prints]. I don’t have a particular style that I want to create. I plan to continue expressing myself through various media, not just fashion. I created this piece with the intention of wearing it myself.

What’s the best thing about Coconogacco?
This is a place where you can actually see and hear the opinions of people who might not have experience in making clothes, but have other experience, like in theatrical performance, painting, operating heavy machinery, and other things. People who approach fashion from all directions.

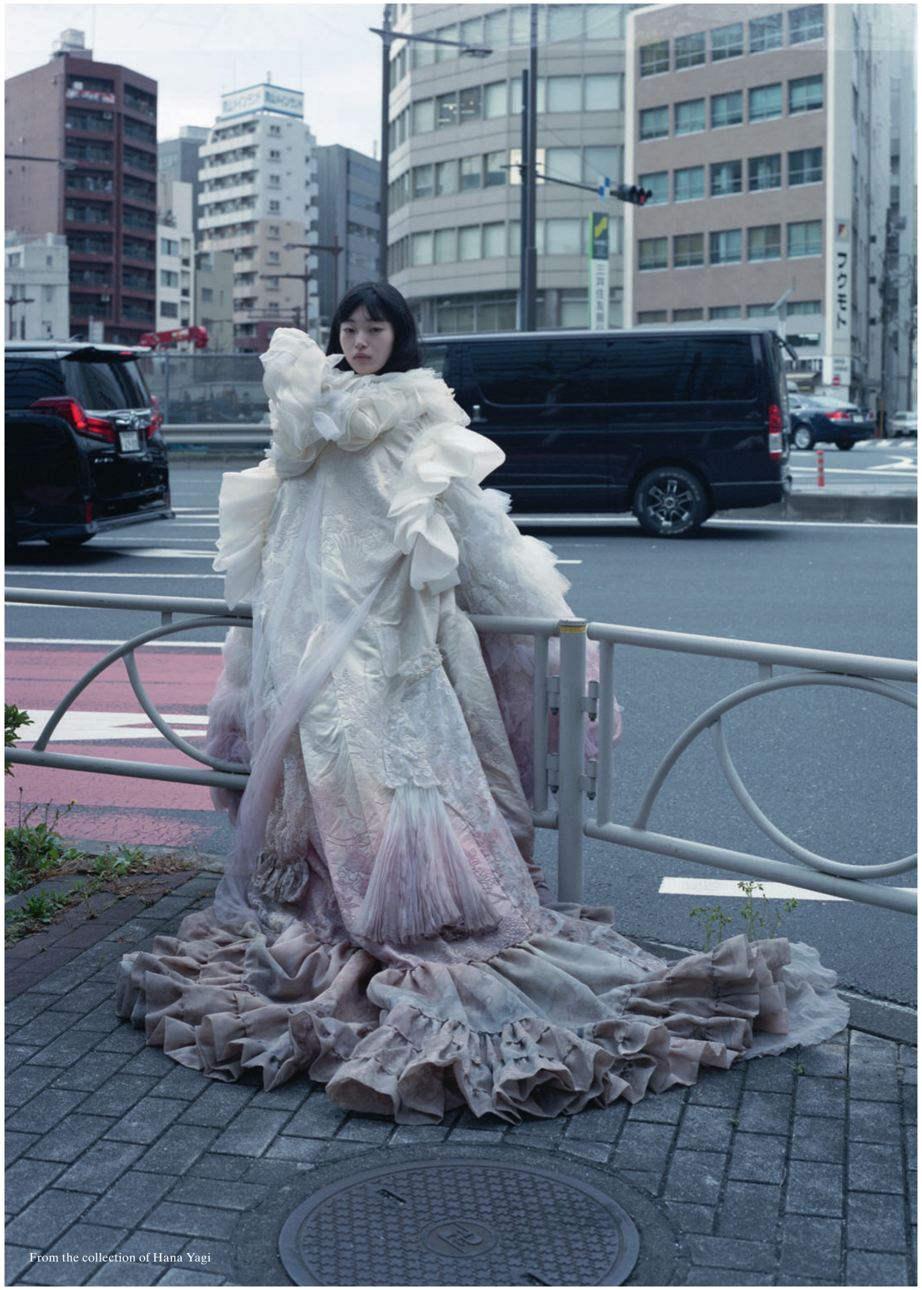
Which person in fashion do you most admire, and why?
Craig Green, because anything he creates is cool.

What do you think a younger designer like yourself can express to the world through fashion that a designer from an older generation could not?
This question is too difficult to answer at the moment. I do not know that yet.

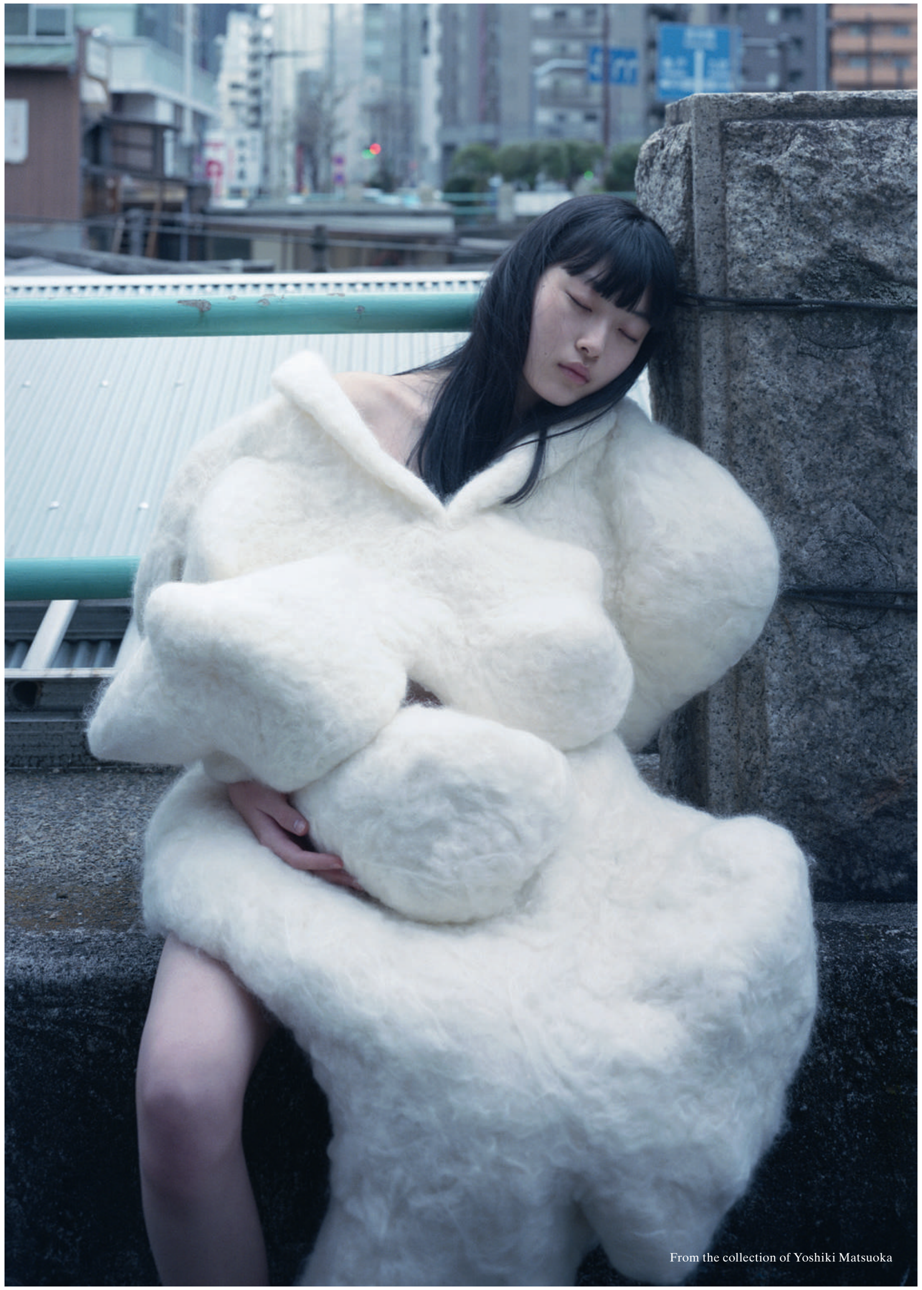
Where do you want to be professionally in five years’ time?
Nowadays, art and fashion go back and forth between each other, and I don’t think there is any need to separate them. From now on, I would like boldly to challenge every medium of expression, and in five years, I would like to attract attention from various fields as a promising newcomer.



From the collection of Karu Miyoshi



From the collection of Hana Yagi



From the collection of Yoshiki Matsuoka

> **‘I’ve embellished vintage wear with Japanese food labels from the 1920s onwards, each wrapped in fibre. Product packaging, like fashion, is created purely to convince and persuade.’**
>
> **Tomohiro Shibuki**

Tomohiro Shibuki, 34

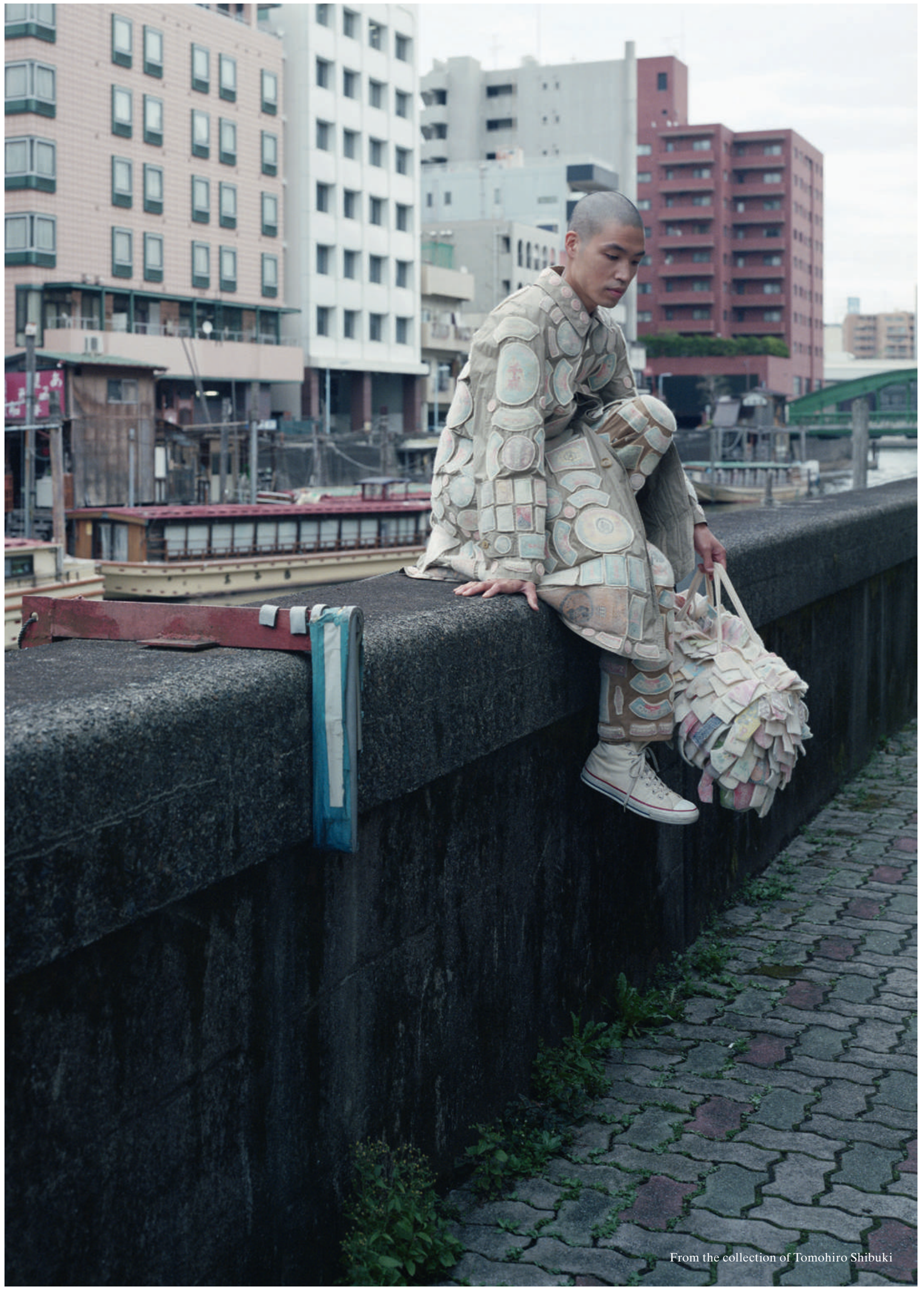
Tell us about your collection.
My work as an artist is based on the idea of blurring the boundaries between everyday objects to create work that leaves room for the imagination. In my collection, I used the technique of covering various objects with fibres, like vintage wear I’ve entirely embellished with Japanese food labels from 1920s onwards, each wrapped in fibre. The encapsulated objects are trapped, and appear as ambiguous, altered entities. The other part of the collection is based on food and product packaging from my own life under the pandemic. In the collection, I contrast each end of this 100-year time span, and the hyper-personal with the popular. Product packaging, like fashion, is created purely to convince and persuade. In a sense, that purity of purpose has a kind of nakedness, so the project is also an act of covering these naked things with warm hair, like drawing a blanket over a naked person.

What’s the best thing about Coconogacco?
It’s provided me with the time to reflect upon myself.

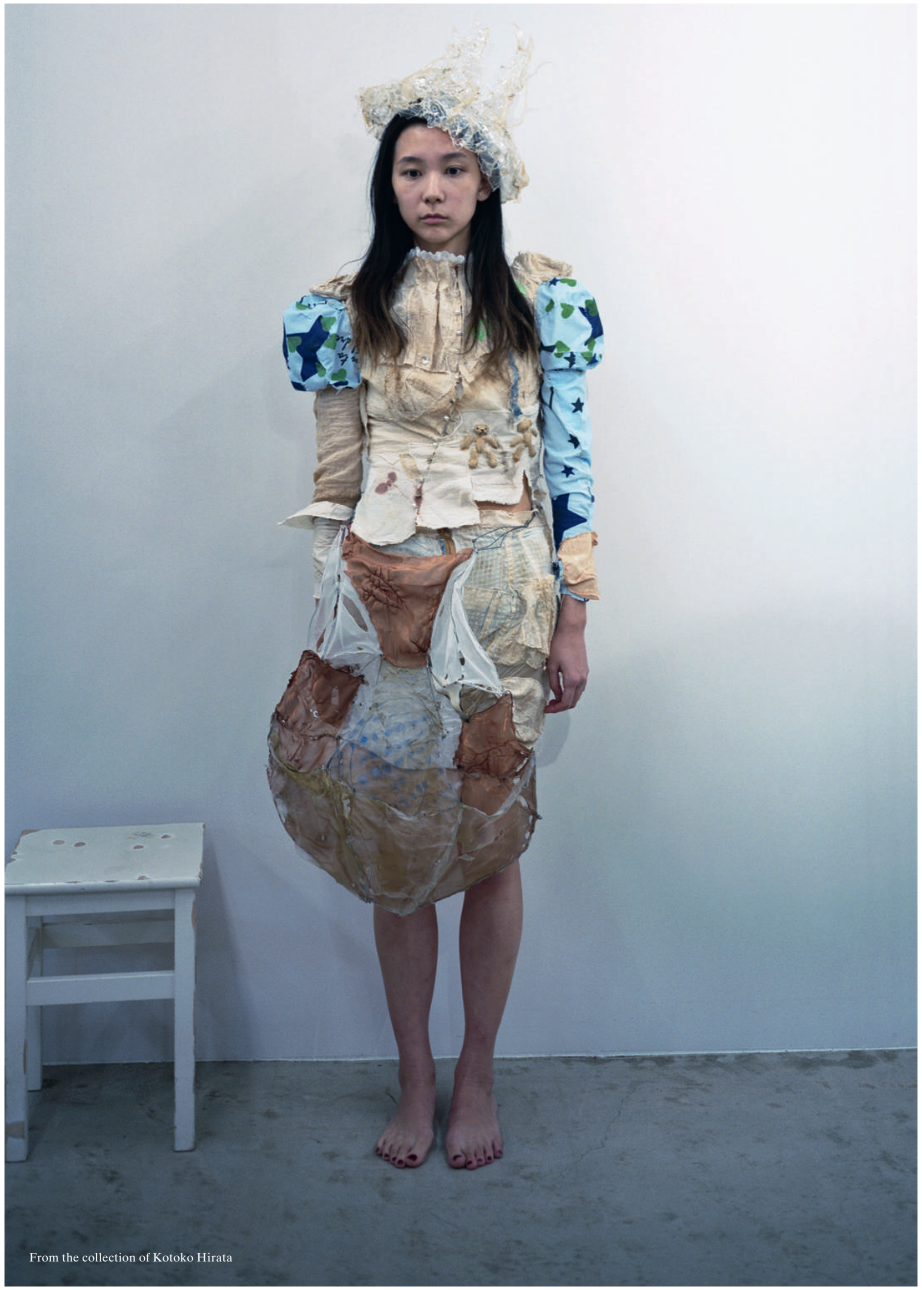
Which person in fashion do you most admire, and why?
Martin Margiela. I was really influenced by the way he reconstructed things through strange combinations of materials, and the way he showed respect for all kinds of clothes from the past.

What do you think a younger designer like yourself can express to the world through fashion that a designer from an older generation could not?
The current generation is in an environment where it is easy to transcend barriers between different fields and disciplines, and I believe that doing so proactively will have a positive impact not only in fashion but also on cultural formation in a broader sense.

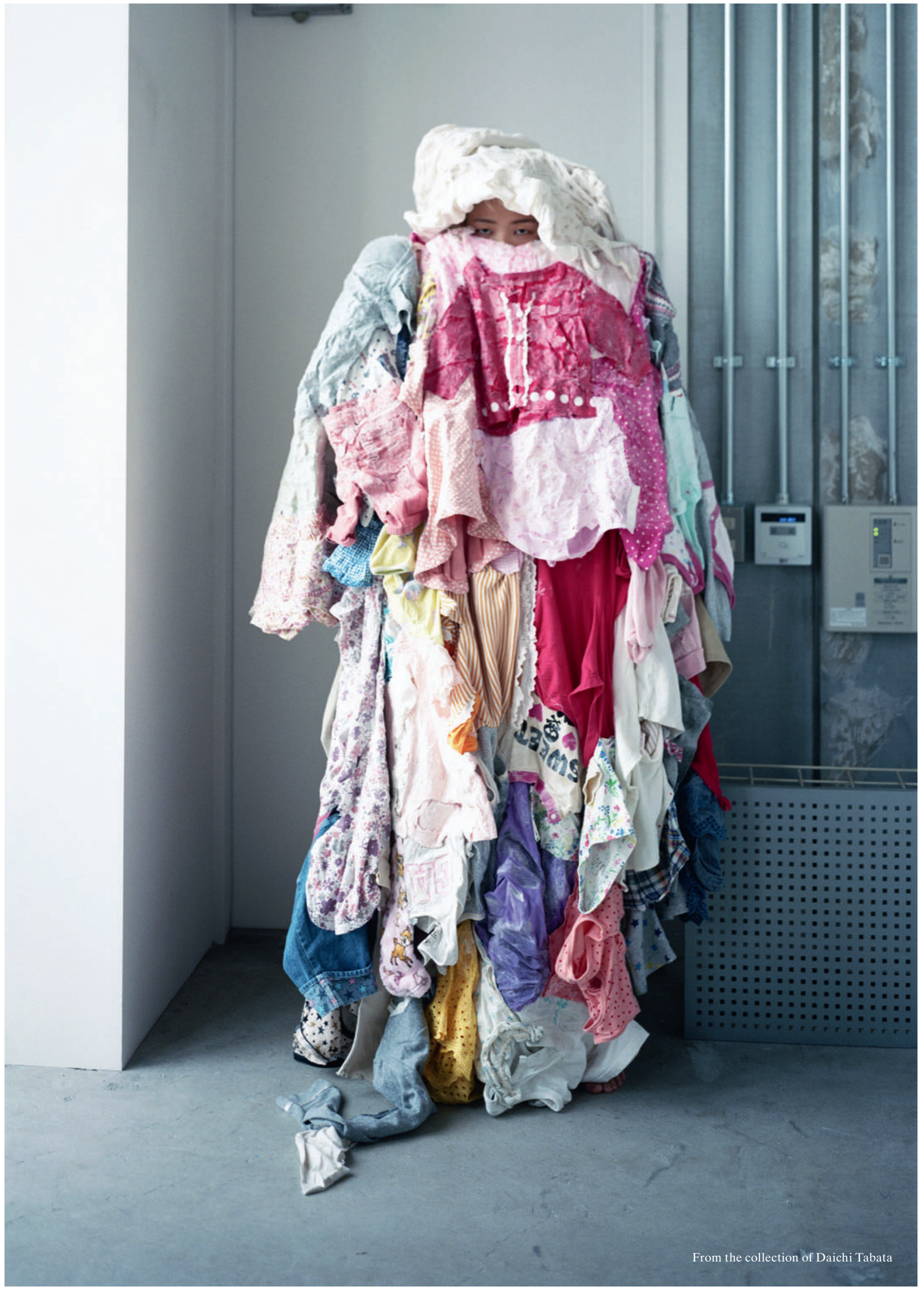
Where do you want to be professionally in five years’ time?
I am hoping to expand the scope of my activities, continue to create and think, and be a person who can freely express what I want to express.



From the collection of Tomohiro Shibuki



From the collection of Kotoko Hirata



From the collection of Daichi Tabata

‘I am not aiming to be a designer. Five years from now, I just want to be a kind person.’

Hirate

Hirate, 23

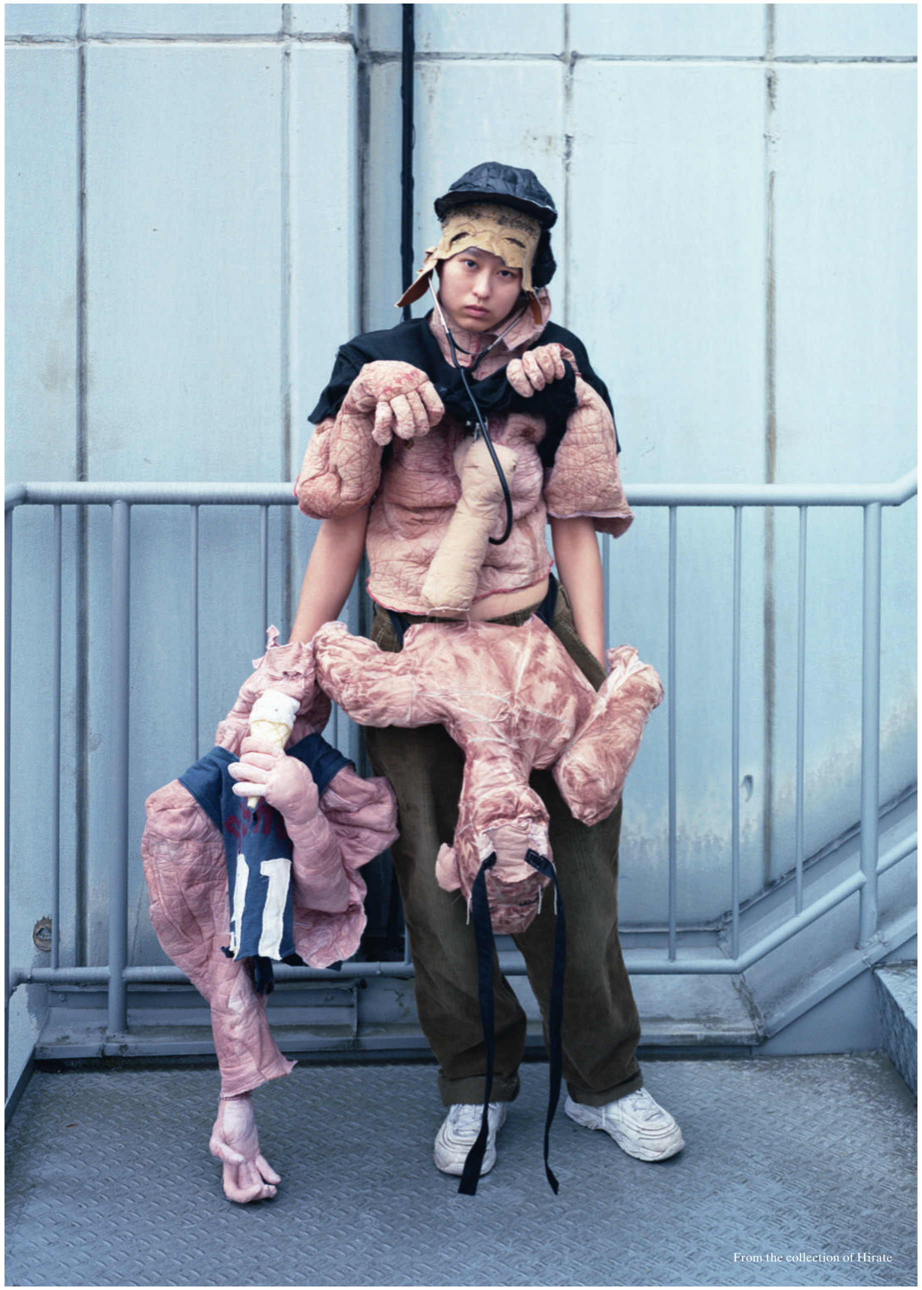
Tell us about your collection.
In the process of transforming an imaginary existence into a real object, I tried to give it a function as clothing. I think about the existence of my creation in this world, how it stands and how it is. In reality, it is almost impossible for my creations to be functionally worn as daily wear, but I believe that the structure itself, which is created to accept the human body, has a strong influence on the fundamental sense of the object’s existence. I am fascinated by the tremendousness and beauty of any person’s attempt to depict ‘someone’ while remaining alone in that self-expression. And I want to do that in my way, too.

What’s the best thing about Coconogacco?
Rather than dividing fashion into sections and focusing on so-called ‘practical’ knowledge, I have been able to explore it as a huge, muddy stream. While being tossed about by its vastness, I could try to find the essence of what fashion is.

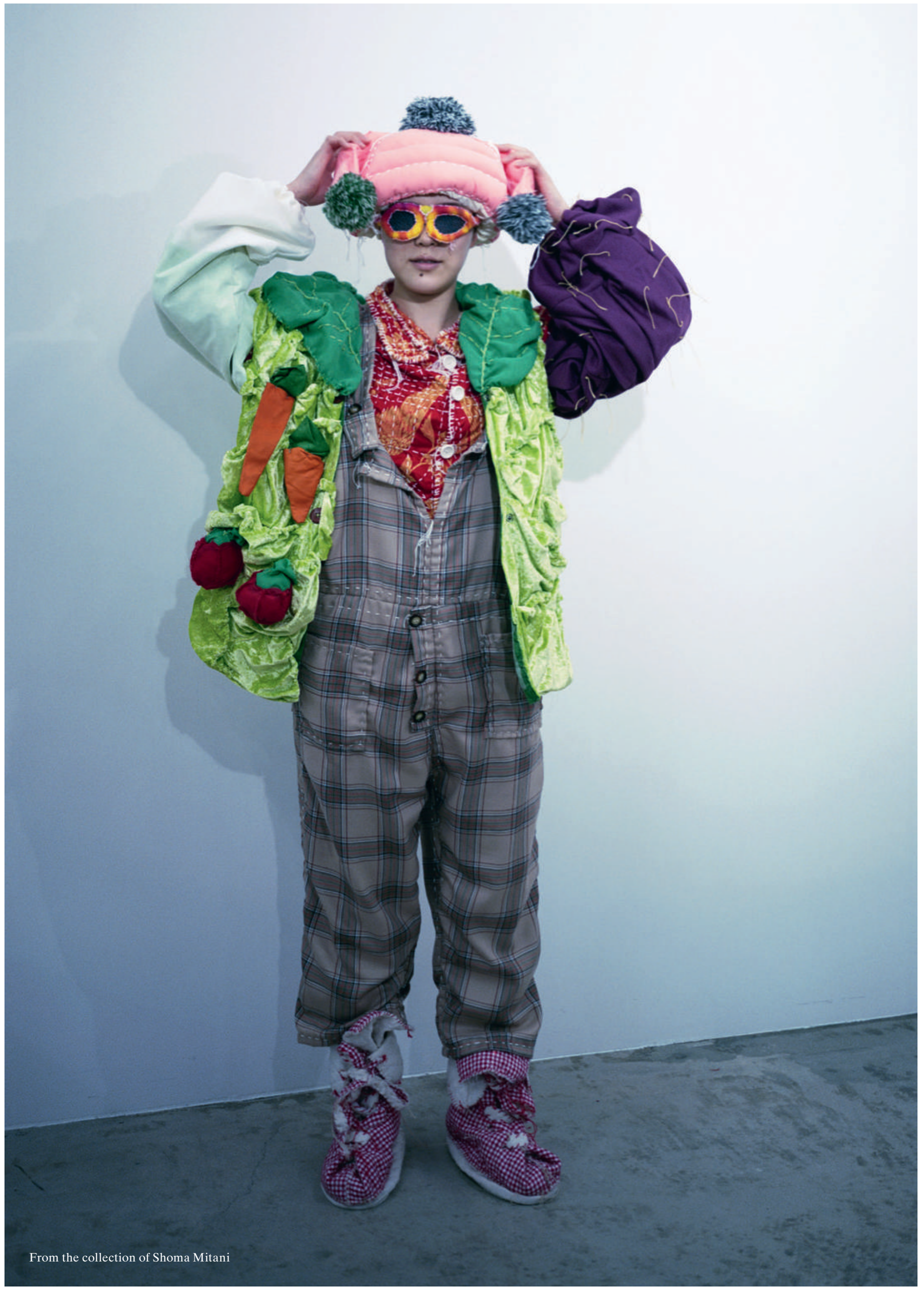
Which person in fashion do you most admire, and why?
I can’t think of anyone in particular.

What do you think a younger designer like yourself can express to the world through fashion that a designer from an older generation could not?
I am afraid that I cannot answer this one. To be honest, I have no idea what the difference is between the past and the present.

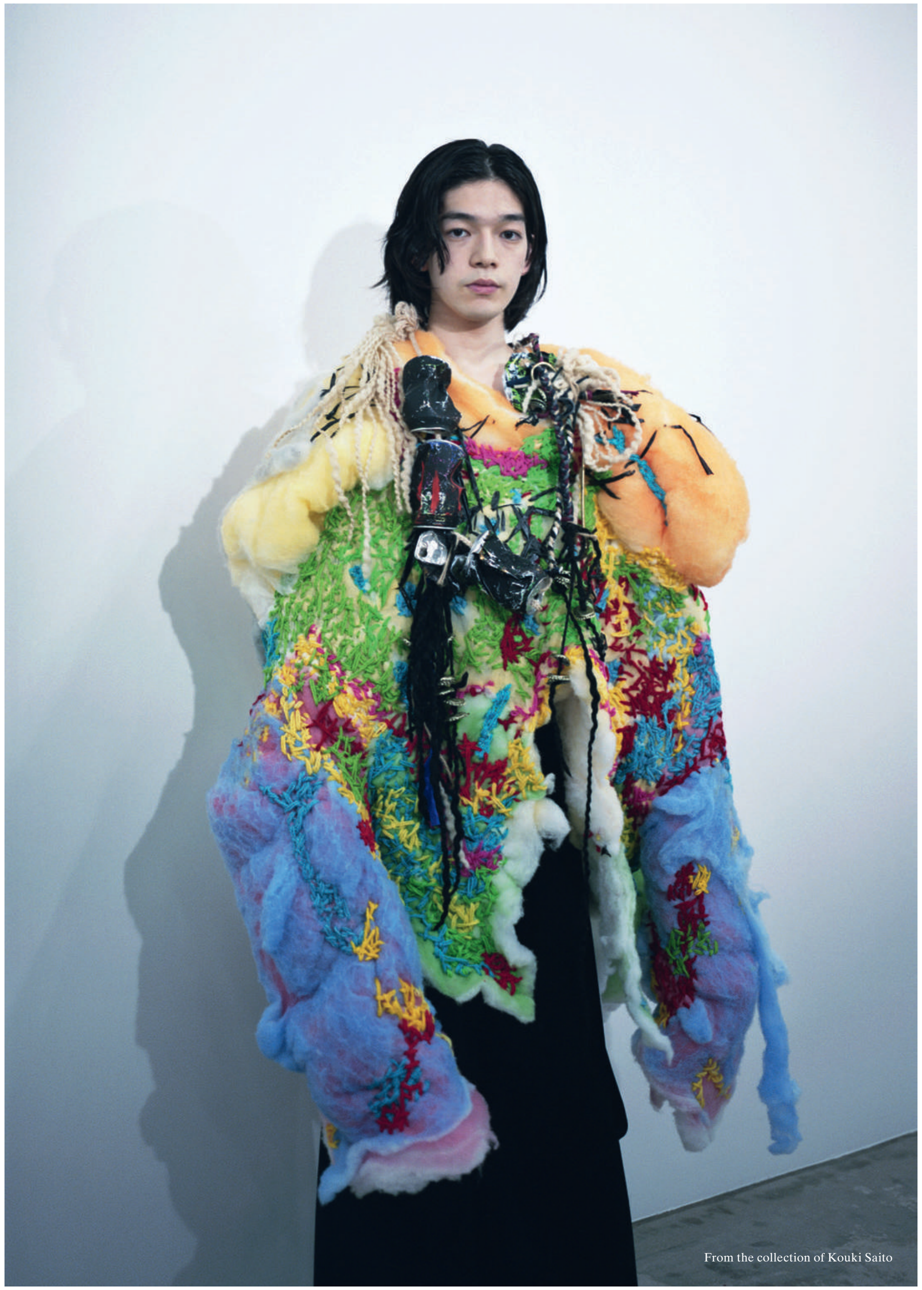
Where do you want to be professionally in five years’ time?
I am not aiming to be a designer. Five years from now, I just want to be a kind person.



From the collection of Hirate



From the collection of Shoma Mitani



From the collection of Kouki Saito

> **‘My references were developed during my research into the history of dementia, as well as my grandfather’s belongings and photographs. People with dementia experience what’s been called ‘ambiguous loss’, and the collection is shaped by perspectives on loss, absence and memory.’**
>
> **Ei Nakamura**

Ei Nakamura, 20

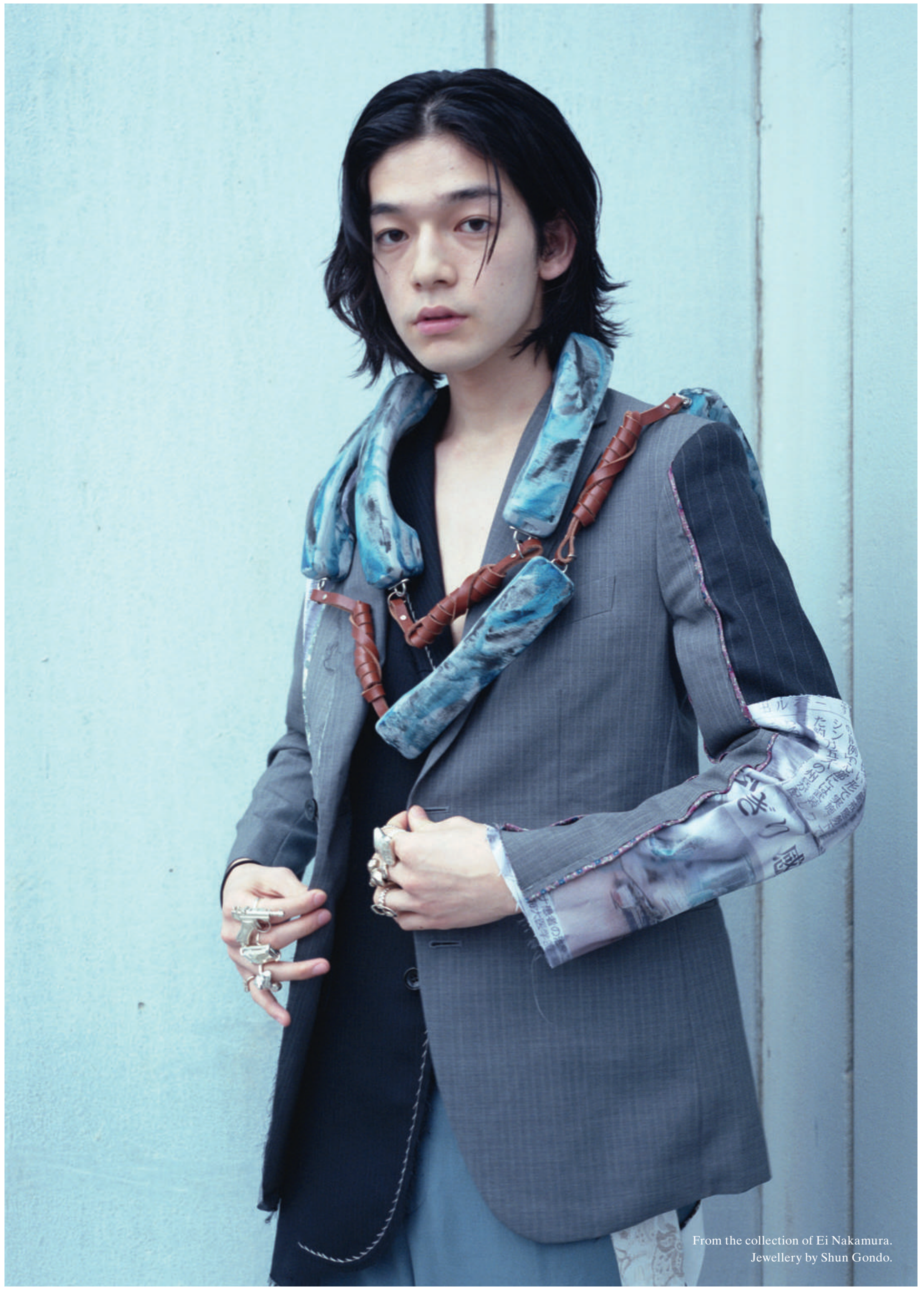
Tell us about your collection.
I was thinking about the way dementia affects relationships between family members, something I had studied in graduate school. My references were photographs documenting the history of dementia research, fieldwork and interview data conducted during my research, as well as my grandfather’s belongings and photographs. People with dementia experience something that’s been called ‘ambiguous loss’, and the collection is shaped by perspectives on loss, absence and memory.

What’s the best thing about Coconogacco?
It’s an environment where you can express yourself, while also paying attention to trivial things.

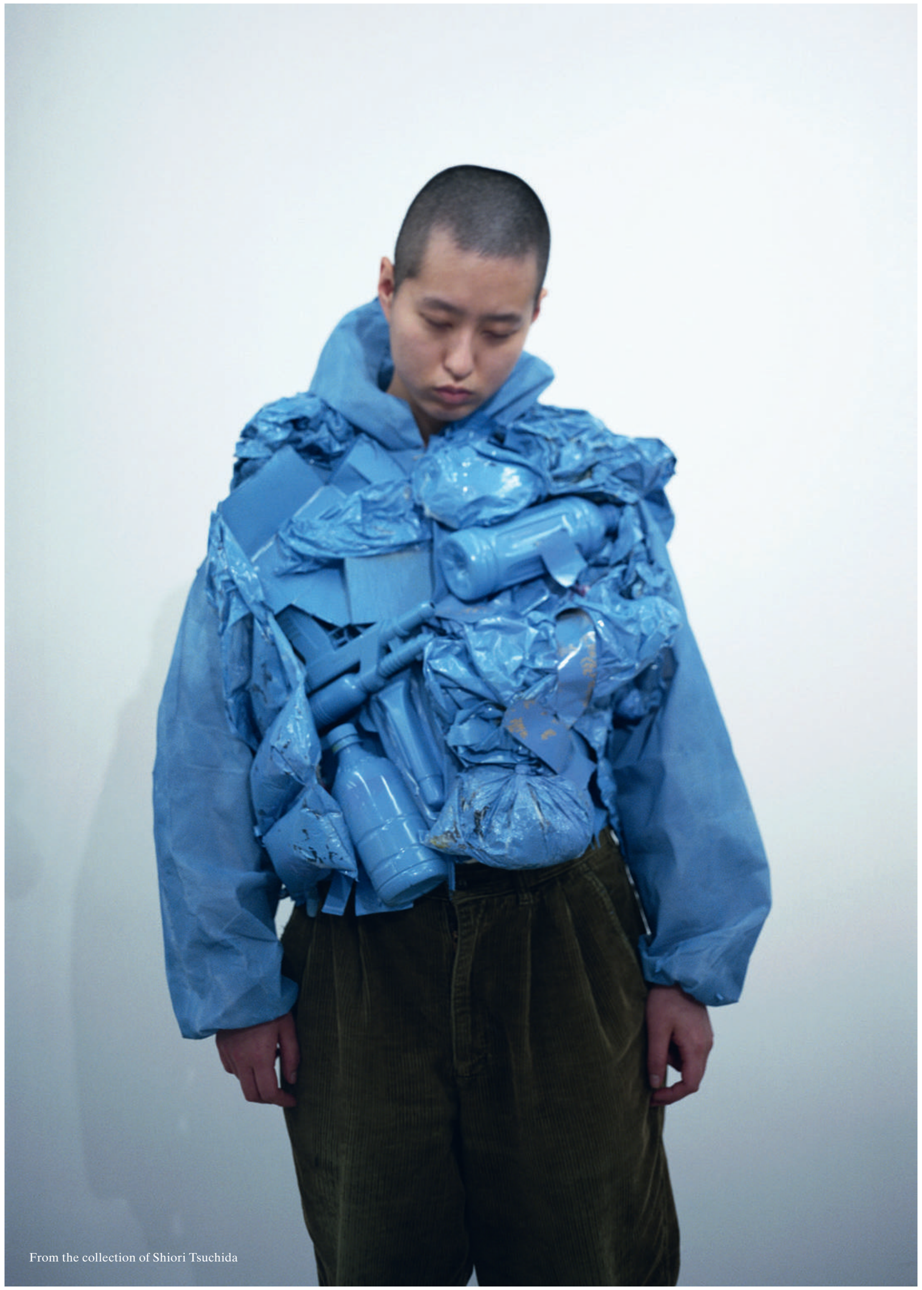
Which person in fashion do you most admire, and why?
Yoshikazu Yamagata.

What do you think a younger designer like yourself can express to the world through fashion that a designer from an older generation could not?
An awareness of those people who have been left out of the hierarchical fashion world. A diversity of individuals rather than diversity of the whole.

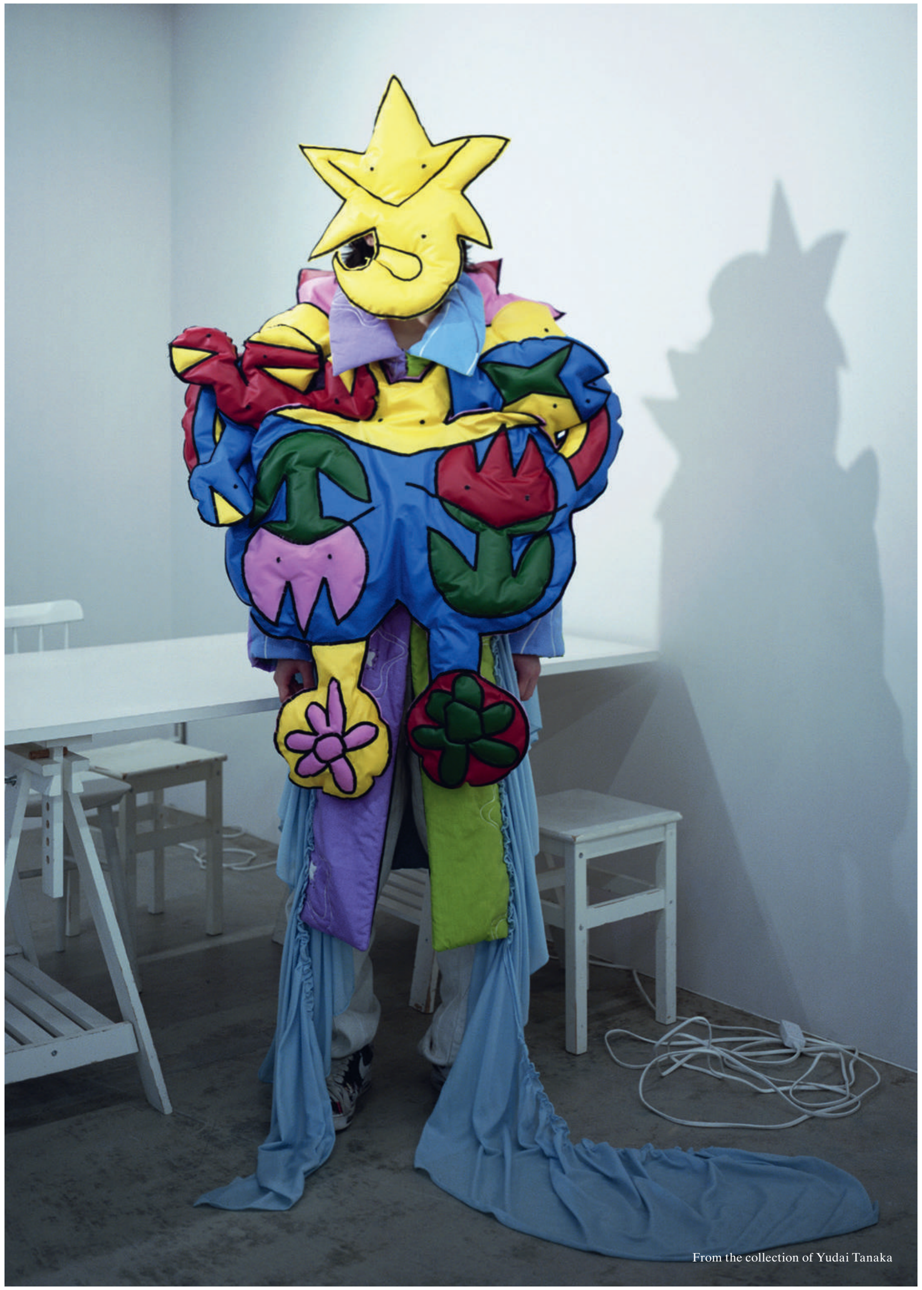
Where do you want to be professionally in five years’ time?
I would like to make use of my research activities in graduate school to actively build bridges between subject areas.



From the collection of Ei Nakamura.
Jewellery by Shun Gondo.



From the collection of Shiori Tsuchida



From the collection of Yudai Tanaka

> **‘Using the various sizes and colours of the fibres, I like to convey a perspective from the microscopic to the cosmic.’**
>
> **Takahito Iguchi**

Takahito Iguchi, 35

Tell us about your collection.
I have experience working in textile testing and inspection; we deliberately apply loads to fabrics and destroy them. When I saw lots of these scraps mixed together, I thought they were beautiful and so decided to use them and other post-test fabric pieces. Using the various sizes and colours of the fibres, I like to convey a perspective from the microscopic to the cosmic. I have been collecting and sorting lint every day for two years, and I created my piece by imagining the cleanliness of lint and the act of sorting it, in the style of myself and the people around me at work.

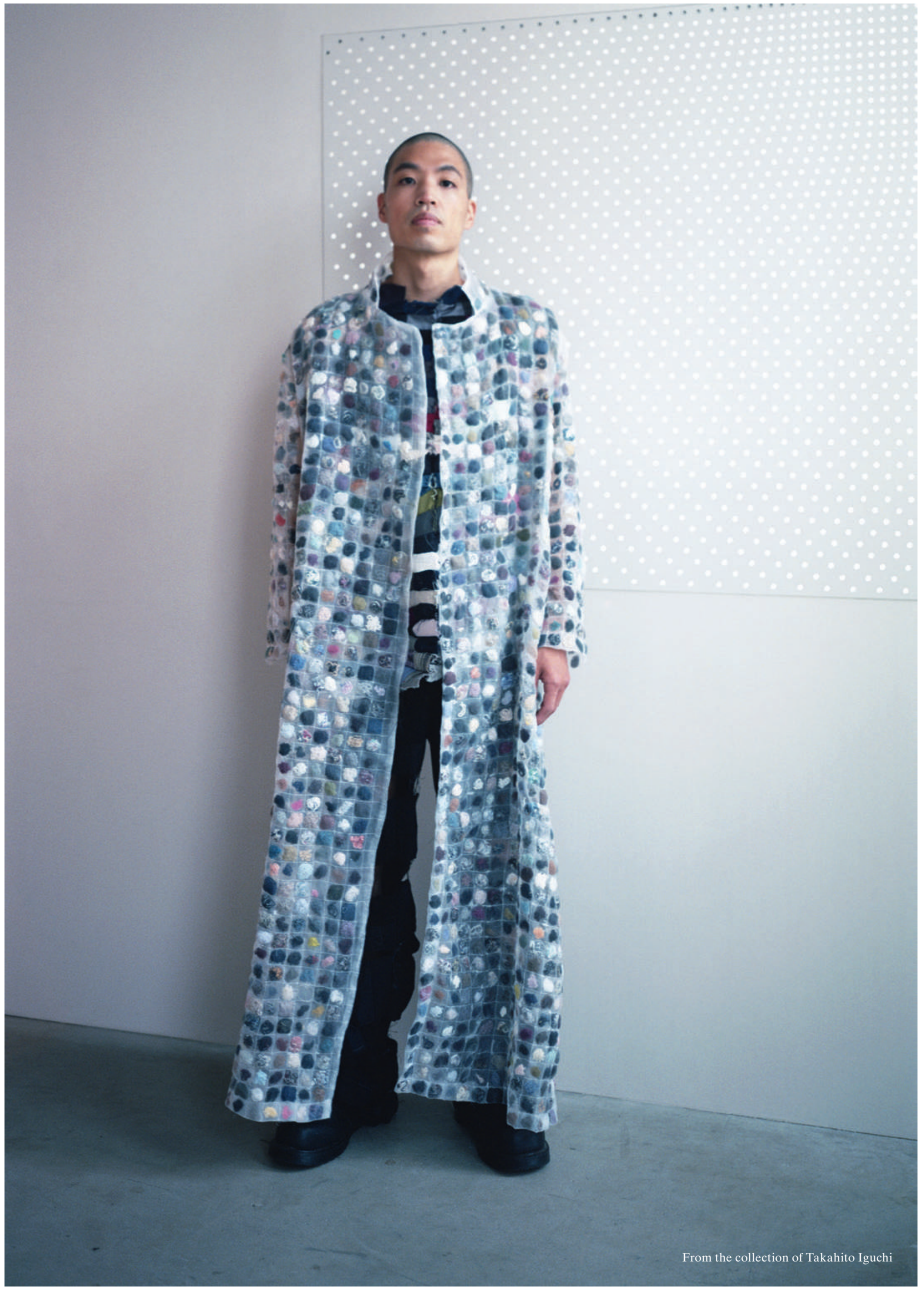
What’s the best thing about Coconogacco?
I really like that it’s a place where people from various professions and generations can gather.

Which person in fashion do you most admire, and why?
Jun Takahashi from Undercover, because he is challenging Paris with his own style.

What do you think a younger designer like yourself can express to the world through fashion that a designer from an older generation could not?
Free expression without the boundaries or classifications that existed in the past.

Where do you want to be professionally in five years’ time?
I would like to have my own style.

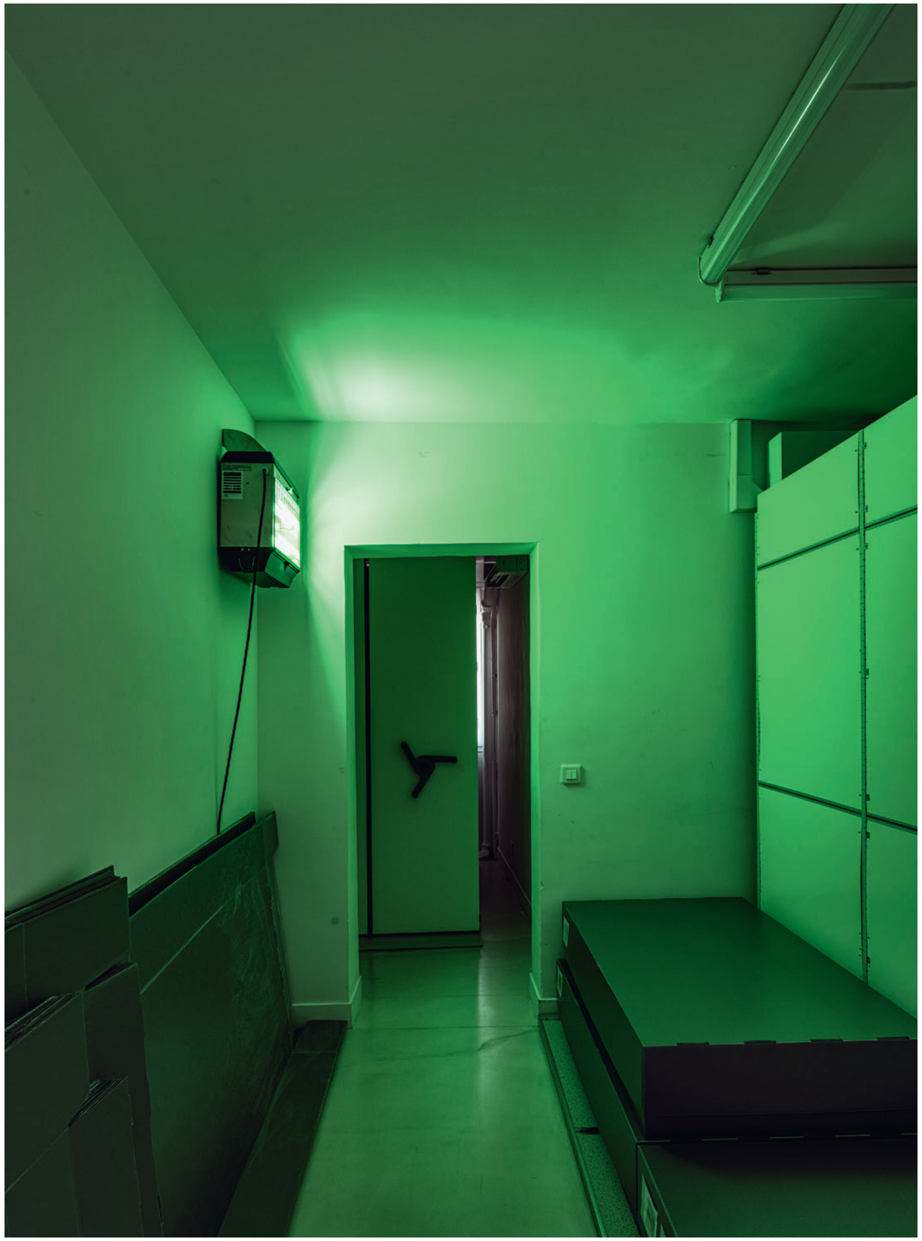
Models: Marina @ Donna Models, Kohei Omachi, Ai Koike, Makiko Horiuchi, Masaki Seko. Hair: Yutaka Kodashiro @ mod’s hair.
Make-up: Dakuzaku @ TRON management. Production: Jun Ishida. Translators: Naoki Matsuyama and Hanako Hirata.


From the collection of Takahito Iguchi

The Azzedine Alaïa Collection

Couture's rebellious outsider spent his life amassing a 35,000-piece collection of fashion history, which no one had access to – until now.

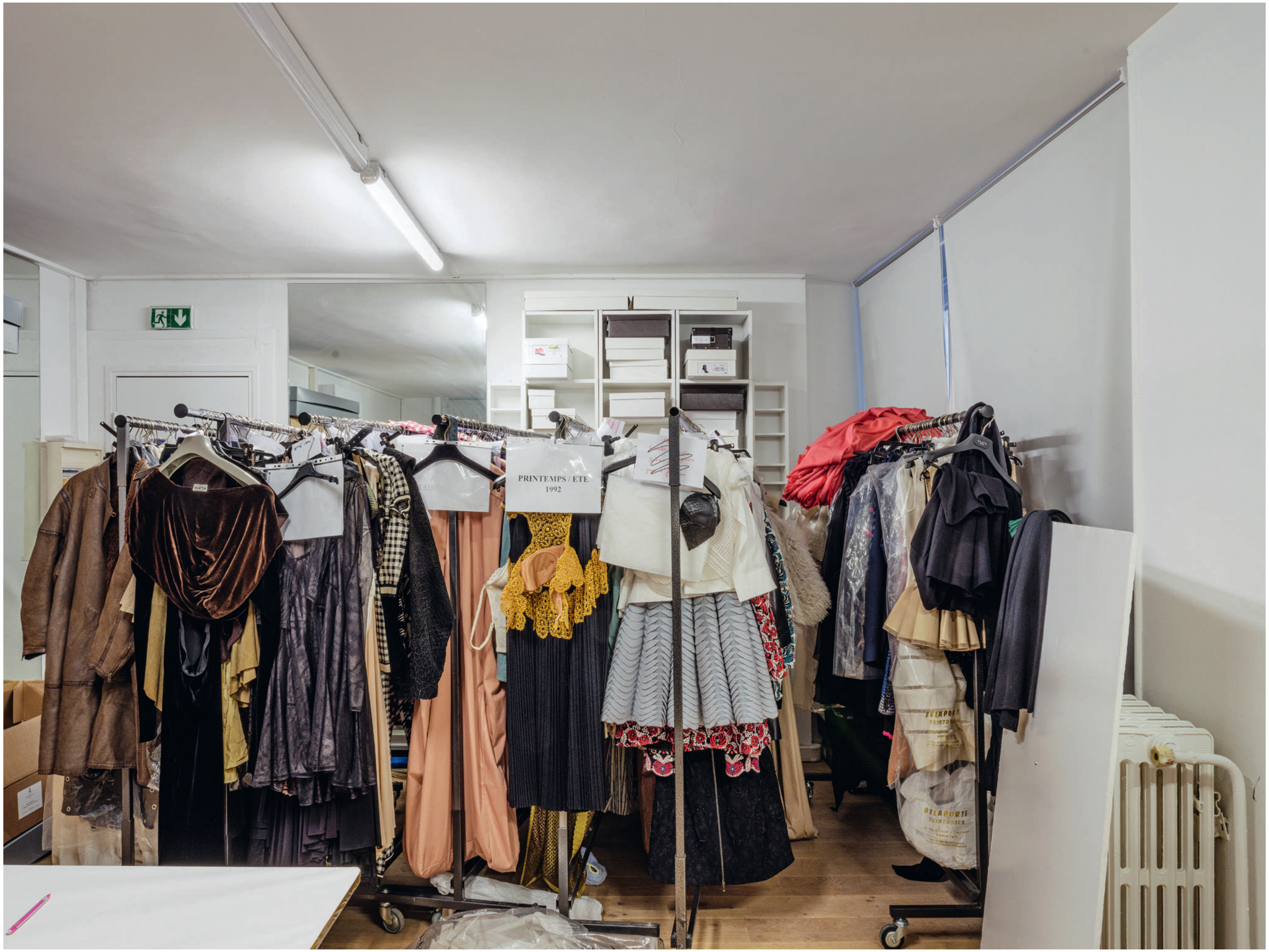
Interview by Thomas Lenthal
Photographs by Robert Polidori



‘This building has always had a real soul, one that fascinated everyone,’ says Carla Sozzani, sitting in her office at 18 Rue de la Verrerie in Paris. ‘It’s a treasure that needs to be preserved, just like Azzedine’s work and the collections.’ From 1987 until the designer’s death in 2017, this ex-warehouse in the Marais neighbourhood was Azzedine Alaïa’s home, HQ, studio, and gallery. Today, it is home to the Fondation Azzedine Alaïa, which has been guided, directed and inspired by Sozzani since its creation. ‘I first met Azzedine in 1981 and we became friends straight away,’ she says. With Christoph von Weyhe, Azzedine’s long-time partner, ‘we started working on creating the foundation in 2000 and began conserving everything – both his own work and the collection.’

That collection, which Alaïa began in 1968 and is today spread around the building from attic to cellar, is arguably the finest private fashion collection ever assembled: a remarkable selection of tens of thousands of pieces by designers both historical and contemporary, from Madeleine Vionnet, Balenciaga and Madame Grès to Courrèges, Comme des Garçons and Margiela. For Alaïa, its decades-long creation was both a quest to preserve fashion history and a powerful personal obsession. ‘He would go to auctions, but say he was going to the physiotherapist. I used to ask him, “How often do you need to see a physio?” And he never went to an auction with the same person, so no one would ever know how often he was going. There was one famous auction in 2005 where I did actually accompany him and he bought a Poiret coat. I could have killed him; it cost a fortune and we didn’t have the money. At one point, as the price reached €120,000 or so I said to him, “That’s not us bidding, is it?”’ Alaïa eventually paid €131,600 for the coat.

When the designer died aged 82, Sozzani knew she would need expert help to catalogue and archive the collection, which was bigger than anyone had ever imagined (‘He would buy things and not tell anyone,’ she says. ‘In his studio we found things he’d bought and then hidden’). So she turned to curator, designer and fashion historian Olivier Saillard, whom she says Alaïa ‘adored and respected’. In the following interview, Saillard discusses the details of Azzedine Alaïa’s remarkable collection, his sense of fashion history, and the future of this unique time capsule.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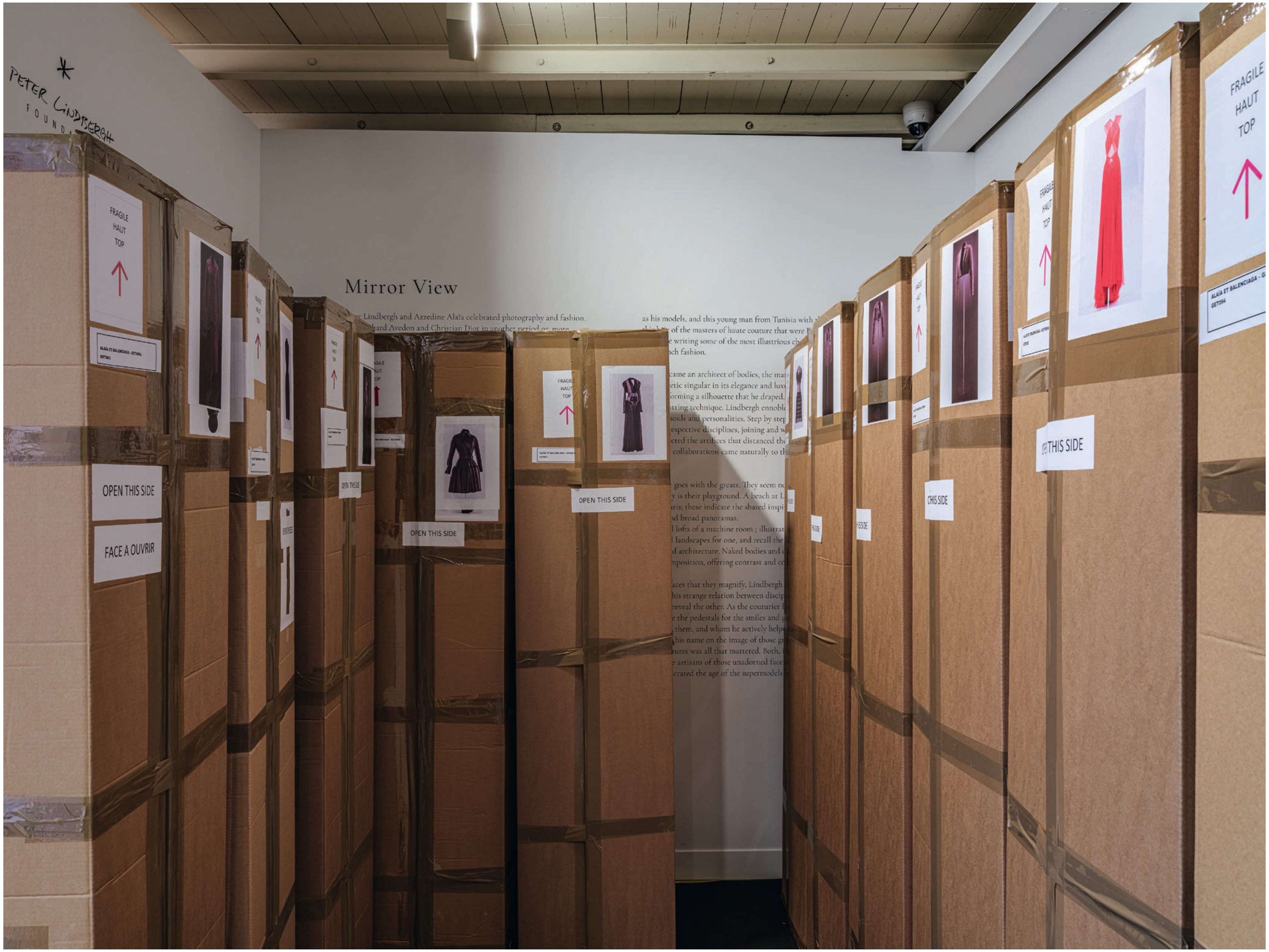
PETER LINDBERGH
FOUND
Mirror View
FRAGILE
HAUT
TOP
OPEN THIS SIDE
FACE A OUVRIR
ALAÏA ET BALENCIAGA - GETD94

WORTH
5739
ROBE
DOUCET - LAFERIERE
SCHIAPARELLI
CAPE DE SOIE
LONGUE NOIRE
SATIN JACQUARD
6981
JEAN PATOU 6964
6949
6965
Bolero Brodé
Maillot de Bain ROCHAS
1937/40
ROBE SAINT-LAURENT PERLES
MAILLOT D.B. 30s
ELISABETH
HAWES
ALAÏA

Thomas Lenthal: Do you know when Azzedine Alaïa started collecting clothes?

Olivier Saillard: We know exactly: it was 1968, when the house of Balenciaga closed and Mademoiselle Renée, who had been joint director of the house, called him and told him to come and collect the leftover dresses and fabrics, suggesting that he could do what he wanted with them, maybe use them for his own tailoring purposes. Azzedine would always recall, up until even a few months before his death, that he'd had an extraordinary revelation that day and his sense of fashion heritage had been born. He never stopped collecting clothes from that moment onwards.

What was his goal when he started the collection?

> ‘Azzedine’s an extremely rare case: the only man in fashion who ever really cared about its history, not just his own, but that of the entire discipline.’

He's an extremely rare case: the only man in fashion who ever really cared about its history, not just his own, but that of the entire discipline. In design, and traditional and contemporary art, you see artists who become collectors, but in fashion, there is only one: Alaïa. This little designer originally from Tunis, who immoderately collected objects related to the history of fashion created by its great names. I think he was scared of being forgotten, as happened to other couturiers. I remember he was marked by the sad end of Paul Poiret,[1] and the tragic end of Jacques Fath,[2] and how these once big names had been forgotten. He would call me when I was director of the Musée Galliera and tell me he was outraged and upset that we weren't collecting or buying more clothes for the museum. He saw them as physical proof of many hours of work because, as a man of the atelier, he knew just how long it took to make even the simplest garment, and the lifetime's commitment that each represented. He couldn't bear the idea that the memory of this atelier work and that of the couturier might be discarded.

Was it always his ambition to build an important collection?

It became so almost in spite of Azzedine himself. Two collections marked his life as a fashion historian: those of the Musée des Art Décoratifs and UFAC.[3] One day Yvonne Deslandres, who ran the place, asked him to come and help her put the Madeleine Vionnet dresses on mannequins, because she couldn't work out which way round they went.[4] We know that clients did sometimes go back to the house to be helped in putting their dresses on, because they didn't understand how. Azzedine loved that about Vionnet – you have to know the inside of the garment and the technique behind it. It was like he was always trying to reassure himself about his technical skills when compared to other designers. He learned from them, but he never copied. I've never found any clothes that he took apart, so my theory is that he learned by studying how, say, a sleeve was put together. A curator who analyses just the style or the work can't possibly know that about a garment. That experience made him aware of the role that he could have in history, and consolidated and increased his desire to collect. It was like a mission, but he didn't seem to want to show it – it was the act of collecting that was more important.

Do you think his position evolved over time?

It evolved according to the amount he was able to invest in it. Yet even when the house was at its most fragile and vulnerable, Azzedine was still at auction houses buying pieces at insane prices. In the 1980s, the designer Adrian died.[5] He had been MGM's main costume designer and also had his own house. His son called Azzedine and said, ‘I have all my father's archives, all his sketches, and it's all an hour from New York.’ Azzedine was in the city at the time and so went over there in a lorry and bought all of it. Every piece. He had this desire to compete with the fashion museums, with whom he'd both clashed and fallen in love. He wanted to collect pieces himself, those the museums didn't always have the means to buy.

How many pieces are there in the collection?

There are more or less 15,000 pieces in the historical Patrimoine collection, and then on top of that, there is also the collection of all the clothes that he designed, which is about 20,000 pieces.

So, 35,000 pieces in total. Who are the designers and roughly how many pieces are there per designer? I've heard that he edited the history of 20th century fashion by choosing a certain amount for each designer…

He had all the master couturiers, the veritable architects. He clearly wanted to be part of a sort of family tree that begins with Vionnet, Balenciaga and Madame Grès.[6] There is a lot of Madame Grès and we're still finding new ones, but we're already at around 600 pieces for her. Some Schiaparelli. His taste for Poiret developed a little more when he hosted a sale of a collection owned by the Poiret family in 2005, and then he bought a lot. In order: Balenciaga, 600 to 700 pieces; Grès, more than 600; Vionnet, a bit less. Adrian, it's the biggest collection in the world; no museum in America has more. There is a fair amount of Dior because Azzedine used to say that having grown up in Tunisia, Dior evoked France and Paris. He was always curious to know how the underside of Dior dresses were constructed. Lots of early Chanel, from Mademoiselle Chanel's time, and lots of suits and early pieces. Quite a bit of Lanvin, Poiret and a lot of Jacques Fath. And then there are all those couturiers whose reputations have faded, because the houses weren't bought – secondary names, like Augusta Bernard who was the height of chic, pure simplicity.[7] For me, her work is even more beautiful than Vionnet, but she's virtually forgotten. And lots of Jean Patou dresses – a key person who has also been forgotten today, some beautiful looks.[8] And so many more others, Claire McCardell, Charles James… But not in quite such vast quantities as the others.

'The collection includes 600 to 700 Balenciaga pieces; more than 600 Grès; Vionnet, a bit less. Adrian, it's the biggest collection in the world…'

And among his contemporaries?

It's large. There is Cardin and Courrèges, including 40 pairs of shoes! Then from later, a lot of Comme des Garçons, Yohji Yamamoto, Issey Miyake, lots of Junya Watanabe, and Japanese designers in general; Margiela, Jean Paul Gaultier, Thierry Mugler, with whom he actually worked and who really helped him at the beginning. And Westwood who would come to the shows here; Galliano. Some Saint Laurent, because Azzedine sewed the Mondrian dresses, so one day he bought the dress that he himself had made.[9] He would often go and help out houses when they were missing staff and when they needed a beautiful hand.

It's a big collection for an individual collector, but is it comparable to a museum collection like the Costume Institute at the Met in New York?

In terms of size, no, the Costume Institute at the Met is more important. That's the biggest. There's one really big difference, though: museum collections, whether it's the Met, Musée des Arts Déco or Galliera, are built on and rely on donations. So they have weaknesses because they might accept one beautiful dress, but have to accept four more that aren't so interesting. Azzedine's collection might be a bit smaller, but it has a vast number of amazing pieces, because they were all chosen by him. He was the curator from start to finish. From 1968 onwards, he was the only person to choose, buy, research and build the collection – which means not much is worthless. Certain parts of the collection are actually better than the museums – you could never organize a Jean Patou exhibition only with museum collections, but with Azzedine's, you really could.

Did he ever talk about a moment when the collection would be completed or did he just continue to buy without any real notion of completion?

It was never completed because he kept buying all the time. He was insatiable. It was mysterious: when you'd ask him what he was going to do with the collection, he would stay silent. He didn't want to show it, although he'd occasionally say, 'We've established an association to preserve this collection in the hope of it becoming a foundation.' It was very intimate, but I think he was saying, 'I created this collection, but it will be for others to order, develop and show it.'

We can trace the history of fashion and couture through his collection. Did he go and see other fashion collections in museums?

He would see other collections and visit exhibitions alone. He saw every single designer exhibition with a certain generosity, a sort of indulgence, which was not always his style. He was also sought after by curators happy to have a designer with whom they could talk about the history of fashion, someone who could discuss it with genuine taste, and bring a highly specialized technical analysis. They used to have to fight him off at the sales; he was a really educated character in that aspect. It's extremely rare that a couturier is so well informed about the history of fashion.

Was he interested in the provenance of the pieces?

Very much so. He was interested in the clients; he loved the cult of the big famous client. He would buy Balenciaga dresses that had been owned by

Elizabeth Taylor, or things that had belonged to Garbo and Claudette Colbert. He once bought the entire wardrobe of a famous model from Jean Patou from the 1930s, the most beautiful pieces.

Before you started, did you know of what exactly the collection consisted?
I knew there was a lot because he'd been buying for nearly 50 years, but I had no idea *quite* how much. I had no idea that the five floors were full of boxes, and that all the apartments that he had bought and were still in their original state, last decorated in the 1970s, 1980s, were filled. The entire basement was also full of boxes.

And you'd never seen any of it?
No, no one had. Only two people who worked at the house were allowed in: Rachid, who helped fold them and Sarah, who has been here forever and helped him wrap the garments. The clothes were pretty well preserved. Not exactly like in a museum, but a garment that's been laid flat and protected from the light can last a long time. The collection was vast, and no one had access to it. When he died, it was a bit overwhelming to find myself with the privilege of seeing it. I also felt slightly guilty as it was only after his death that we really discovered it. I would have liked him to be there when I saw it. I'm not sure he wanted to see what he had acquired, though; he preferred to just keep building it.

When you opened the boxes, was it all mixed up?
All mixed up – you would have some Jean Patou with Vionnet and then some Westwood. It was pretty incoherent, but generally carefully stored.

Is the inventory now complete?
No, no, but it's advancing well. On the historical side, we have two people working with me on the inventory, who work on the computer with photographs. The exhibitions we've done on Adrian and Balenciaga have also really helped us progress. We've done building work on all the floors to convert the rooms and put up mobile aisle shelving, like you find in museums. We have bought proper clothes covers; we've removed all the dust. On the historical side, I would say that 95% of the work is done, but an inventory never really finishes. You have a dress that you've described briefly to start with, but then you have to document it in more detail later. We're getting there, though.

So I'm guessing that you now know what Azzedine considered to be the height of the art of couture?
There was no question about it: it had to be Balenciaga, his expertise in both *tailleur* and *flou*.[10] Indeed, Azzedine was the only one to have really re-explored *flou* dresses after 2000, and they are very, very pretty. At one point, Azzedine tried to go beyond technical demonstrations, and as he got older, he moved towards effortless simplicity. That work really does compete with Balenciaga who I think he saw as the real couturier and someone from whom he learned. Azzedine would have put him first, even if Vionnet was a sort of fashion ideal.

Because Vionnet is the most complex, the most complete in terms of patterns?
In early Vionnet, it is complex and sometimes it is a bit too sophisticated in terms of technique. Sometimes a technique is good because it's simple. Grès is much less sophisticated and technical, but remains exemplary. With Vionnet, what he admired was her intransigence, how she ploughed her own solitary path, and her research. She decided to do only what she knew how to do; in other words, she never succumbed to fashion's passing fads, and instead retained a strict sense of design that came to an end at a certain point. She also did so much to combat copying and Azzedine was always furious with copiers; he didn't understand how you could be a designer and pillage the work of others. And Vionnet did a great deal for the artistic recognition of couturiers, setting legal precedents by taking legal action. In 1929, *Vogue* has a story about an important case she took against plagiarizers and counterfeiters, which she won and ensured that fashion designers and their creative work had the same legal recognition as other arts.[11]

How did you become involved with the foundation?
I first met Azzedine in 1995. He was president of the Espace Mode Méditerranée in Marseille and I had just been appointed as curator of the city's Fashion Museum. He already had a really active role in advising on the fashion purchases for the museum. Then that ended because I think he really wanted to continue collecting for himself. Then we lost contact, but in 2013, I suggested

> **'Even when Azzedine's own house was at its most fragile and vulnerable, he was still going to auctions and buying historical pieces at insane prices.'**

that he should be the subject of the exhibition with which we reopened the Musée Galliera after its long closure.[12] He was so honoured by the fact that he was being recognized by the museum. During the show he would visit every two days, taking people round, both celebrities and others. He was really very proud of the exhibition. He died in 2017, so if we hadn't done that exhibition, he wouldn't ever have had a retrospective in a French museum during his lifetime. He was always very flattered to be considered not just as a couturier, but as an auteur, an artist. After that, we established a great relationship. When he died, we were all extremely shocked; it really came out of nowhere. He didn't ever want to talk about age. After he died, I had a drink with Carla one evening, and she asked if I'd like to come and help with the foundation, and that Azzedine would have been happy for me to become the director and start the inventory. I really didn't want to do any more archives, but it felt like a mission. Azzedine had not just collected clothing; he had also saved a part of French history and a fashion legacy like no museum would ever have been able to do. It felt unimaginable that all of this could disappear, not to mention Azzedine's own work, which I place high in the hierarchy of designers and couturiers. So I worked for free for two years and we got it on track. I had one thought in mind and I told Carla: I would do this so that one day the foundation has the means to become a museum. Create the archives, the inventory – basically, duplicate everything I have done in the museums here at the foundation, and get people from museums involved. The foundation's projects are to finish the archiving of all Azzedine's collections, including the historical Patrimoine collection, in adapted storage facilities like in a museum. Another mission is to organize exhibitions: one a year that talks about the work of Azzedine, and then another that uses the historical Patrimoine collection and his work together. With Carla, we're very careful not to give away everything at once, so as not to exhaust the subject. For example, if we do an Adrian and Azzedine show, we would focus on suits, which would mean excluding all the dresses. After the death of a couturier, people immediately express admiration, but then turn off, so you don't want to reveal everything all at once. Then there's how the work is seen. We're working on a Peter Lindbergh and Alaïa exhibition, which is a wonderful way to reveal his oeuvre through photographs, his taste for the cinema and the design collections. One rare time Azzedine talked to me about the project – and Carla had already understood this – he said that this building is like the Palazzo Fortuny in Venice.[13] It's a place for work, living, exhibiting; there is everything here, a space for a runway show, the ateliers. It's a unique space in the heart of Paris – it's a real *maison* and it has Azzedine's apartment and studio, which are marvellous. When he died, Carla laid dust sheets over everything and it has stayed exactly as it was. All we need to do is open the doors and it can be visited immediately. The boutique will eventually become a museum space; that's in the foundation's charter. Azzedine prepared his afterlife rather well; none of this was destined to be forgotten. When you have all these people in their white jackets preparing an exhibition, there is life here; it's like when you have lots of people in a kitchen. It really feels like what Azzedine would have wanted. There are also education projects, for handing down knowledge to future generations. Our vocation is to use Alaïa to talk about techniques, not style; that's for others – we are all about technique. It's a challenge because it is more difficult to explain technique – 'this is how you cut a jacket' – but I think it has a magic that belongs to Azzedine. We're not about rewarding a student from, say, Saint Martins, but rather one from a vocational high school in Lyon who happens to be an amazing pattern cutter. We are looking to help people from disadvantaged backgrounds. That mission is presided over by Farida Khelfa.[14]

> **'He loved people's work that was different to his. If you look at archive footage of fashion shows, often the only designer in the front row was Azzedine.'**

What do Azzedine's choices and his vision of contemporary fashion say about the industry?

His choice of contemporary designers includes those with an 'auteur' value, whether it is Margiela, Nicolas Ghesquière or earlier, Yohji, Comme des Garçons. He was an expert in the value of the auteur and that was what interested him more than anything, especially the Japanese. He used to invite both Yohji and occasionally Rai Kawakubo for dinner at his house. If you look at archive footage of fashion shows, often the only other designer present was Azzedine; he would be there in

the front row. There was this sort of understanding and mutual admiration between them. There was this sort of appreciation of differences in style; he loved people's work that was very different to his. His fashion collection is so informed and so educated. It really does reflect the history of fashion.

Did he talk about his collection to these other designers?
He didn't show it to them, but he talked to them. He was very proud of it. I think he would talk to people who were open to it; I think he talked about it a lot with Nicolas. I remember after McQueen committed suicide, he was downhearted about it and he talked about how the fashion system was responsible for his death. There were signs in the fashion system that he didn't like. He really understood certain people who refused the system and needed to be independent, like he was. That independence often cost him dearly. If you look at him purely from a historian's perspective, he spent 20 years as a completely unknown couturier, then there was the first ever show in 1979, and then the glory years in the 1980s. But by 1995, he was almost completely forgotten about by the press, even if he did everything for that to happen; he was very cross with a lot of people. Azzedine was never a young man in the spotlight; at the height of his fame, he was already an older man.

'His choice of contemporary designers includes those with an 'auteur' value: Margiela, Nicolas Ghesquière, Yohji Yamamoto, Comme des Garçons.'

He started his house after 30 years in the business.
He did everything with a certain slowness. Between 1995 and 2000, when the big groups started financing things and Prada bought the house, he was actually ready to shut up shop altogether. Meanwhile, he was buying Poiret dresses at auctions. Then all of a sudden, things fell back into place and he pulled himself together: couturiers rarely become so good again at the end of their careers.

No artists or couturiers – no one really.
I do like Chanel's comeback, even though it wasn't her best. It was so daring to make a return like that in 1954 and to start schooling everyone. Azzedine wasn't like that, but he became the great technician. At a time when people were being fired from the houses by the luxury groups, when it was all about style, and just as a new generation was arriving, Azzedine was making the most beautiful white shirts, the most beautiful and most sophisticated evening gowns. Two collections I adore are 2003 and 2011 – they were really incredibly beautiful and without any artifice or mise-en-scène. There are some clothes that from afar, you don't see their complexity, and I think that is interesting. Azzedine is cutting in volume. It isn't couture; it's knowing how to cut, and he was so good at that, above and beyond everyone else. There were highs and lows with Azzedine, and we haven't even talked about his moods. Sometimes he would be suicidal, destructive; I think it was a subconscious need to destroy, occasionally.

Paradoxically, you get the impression that he was also incredibly disciplined and industrious…
Right up to his death, he was in his studio every day and he never went anywhere in the summer. If he travelled, it was to see an exhibition about his work or for a reason; he didn't like tourism or leisure. He was a studio man, like Merce Cunningham, cut from the same cloth. Even with his deformed hands, he was still sewing. He was pugnacious. The *maison* here is like a medina, a city within a city. Everything is here, and that was his great luxury – not having to go anywhere and instead receiving the entire world here. That is what he did with his kitchen, around which so many people have built this myth. It was here that everyone got together and mixed.

And finally, there is a fascination for the feminine with Azzedine; it's quite specific to him.
It's the only case that I have studied. There is always a fascination for the feminine with couturiers, but it's a fantasy about femininity, which is in some ways the couturier seeing himself wearing those clothes; there is a sort of projection. The only one who never really projected himself like that was Azzedine.

Do you see this dialogue between his collection and this fundamental aspect of his oeuvre when you see the pieces?
There was a genuine love of women, that's for sure. They fascinated him; he often talked about his fascination with Greta Garbo, Oum Khalsoum, and with other great women. He was definitely more fascinated by women than by men, for sure. There was a sort of great admiration for women with great spirit, liberated women, whether

unknown or famous, those with an independent femininity. Azzedine felt that what made women beautiful was a sort of authority, a mastery of elegance or style. His grandmother was very autonomous, his mother left his father, and neither ever remarried. There were women in his life who were very influential, incredibly autonomous for their generation and their country and their social position. You know how Azzedine learned he was good at sewing? By doing his sister's sewing homework in the evenings, and he was really motivated when she got great marks. He then worked as a seamstress to fund his studies. Yet it's always more about the technical exercise and the memory of the oeuvre than just femininity. Dior and Jacques Fath, for example, made very feminine things, but they could come close to sentimentality. Azzedine's really not like that. With him, it's more about architecture and volume – and that was also what he collected.

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'There's a film that we found from 1990,' concludes Carla Sozzani, 'when Azzedine had just bought the building. He is giving a journalist a tour and says that he has 4,000 square metres of space and that the whole thing will be completely filled. And look now – it's magnificent. We're going to have the most beautiful museum, which was what he wanted: he wanted to leave his mark.'

Photography assistant: Peter Keyser. Digital darkroom: LBH labs

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1. Born in 1879, Paul Poiret is often credited with freeing women from the corset, while moving clothing away from strict tailoring and towards flowing draping. From 1906 until after the First World War, Poiret revolutionized couture with a series of collections inspired by the 'Orient' — harems, kimonos, turbans — and the Wiener Werkstätte. He closed his house in 1929 and slipped into poverty before dying of Parkinson's disease in 1944.

2. Before his death aged 42 in 1954, Jacques Fath was a leading light of French post-war fashion known for dressing 'young chic *Parisiennes*' and celebrity clients including Ava Gardner, Greta Garbo, Rita Hayworth and Eva Perón. Hubert de Givenchy, Valentino and Guy Laroche all worked for the designer before launching their own labels.

3. The Union française des arts du costume (UFAC) was established in 1948 by fashion professionals with the aim of building a collection for a Parisian fashion museum. In 1981, it merged with the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (MAD) and their joint collections now contain 152,800 items. Yvonne Deslandres ran UFAC from 1966 and then the combined collections from 1981 to 1986.

4. Like Paul Poiret, designer Madeleine Vionnet (1876-1975) was renowned for her flowing drapery-based design. She also made innovative and ingenious use of the bias cut. After learning her trade in London, she moved to Paris and became head seamstress at Callot Sœurs in 1901. She opened her own house in 1912, growing the business rapidly so that by 1922, she had 26 ateliers employing 1,200 seamstresses. She closed the house in 1943 after falling out with a key shareholder and in 1952 donated a large archive of her work to UFAC.

5. Born in 1903, Adrian studied at Parsons in New York and Paris, before being invited to work in Hollywood, aged 24, by Rudolph Valentino's wife Natacha Rambova. His subsequent career, including 12 years at MGM, saw him design thousands of costumes – including Judy Garland's dress and ruby slippers in *The Wizard of Oz* – and dress many of Hollywood's leading actresses, such as Greta Garbo, Jean Harlow and Joan Crawford. In 1941, he opened his own fashion house and defined the wartime look with his broad-shouldered, fabric-saving tailoring. A first heart attack forced him to close the label in 1952; a second killed him in 1959.

6. Madame Grès (1903-1993) was born Germaine Émilie Krebs in Paris and founded her first couture house in 1932. She was renowned for her ability to drape fabrics into dresses, sometimes using up to 20 metres of fabric. Encouraged by couture designer Lucien Lelong, she created Grès (a partial anagram of her husband's first name) in 1942, and apart from a brief pause in 1944 when she was closed down by the occupying Nazi forces, continued designing until her retirement in 1988.

7. Considered one of the most skilled *couturières* of the 1920s and 1930s, Augusta Bernard (1886-1946) had a reputation for producing flowing, delicately elegant garments. The designer retired in 1934 and her label, Augustabernard, closed.

8. In 1921, designer Jean Patou dressed tennis player Suzanne Lenglen in a short, pleated skirt and a sleeveless cardigan for the French Open, a *garçonne* look that launched a trend for women's sportswear. His label's casual yet elegant total looks were sold at his Coin des Sports shop in Paris, while his couture garments put him in competition with Chanel. He also created an extremely successful line of perfumes, including Joy, 'the most expensive scent in the world'. Ruined by the Great Depression and damaged by his military experience during the First World War, he died in 1936 aged 55.

9. Yves Saint Laurent's celebrated homage to Dutch painter Piet Mondrian was his Autumn/Winter 1965 collection.

10. In French, *flou* and *tailleur* are terms for two types of garment-making techniques. *Flou* describes methods used for clothing that is loose-fitting and unstructured, while *tailleur* is used for more tailored and structured work.

11. In 1919, to prevent illegal copying, Madeleine Vionnet began photographing all her designs from the front, back and side (later using a tripartite mirror to achieve the effect in one photograph). She would then give each a name and a serial number.

12. The exhibition, entitled simply *Alaïa*, reopened the Palais Galliera after its renovation and ran from 28 September 2013 to 26 January 2014.

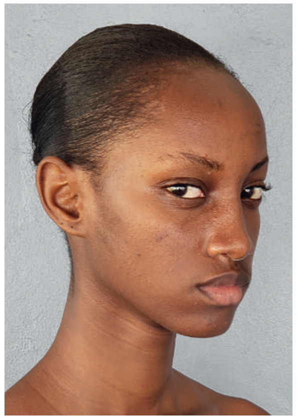
13. The Palazzo Fortuny is a Gothic building in Campo San Beneto in Venice. It was owned by Mariano Fortuny who transformed it into his home and studio where he worked on his photography, stage design, painting and fashion design. In 1956, Fortuny's widow Henriette donated the building to the city and it is today a museum showing his work and eclectic *Wunderkammer*-like collection of objects and art.

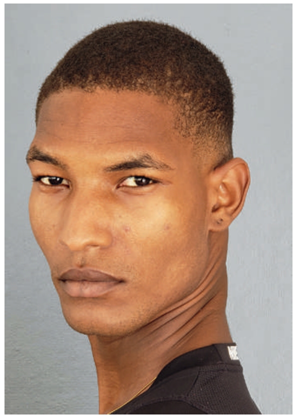
14. Model and actress Farida Khelfa met Azzedine Alaïa in 1982.

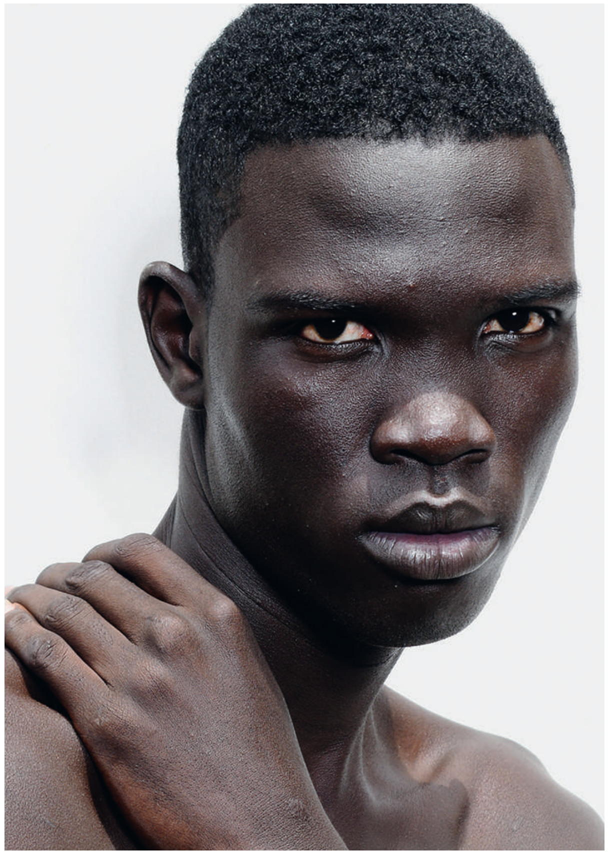
‘A Saint model is one who defines the times we’re in.’

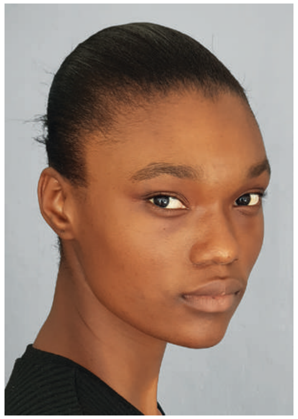
Saint International is the model agency changing lives and expanding horizons.

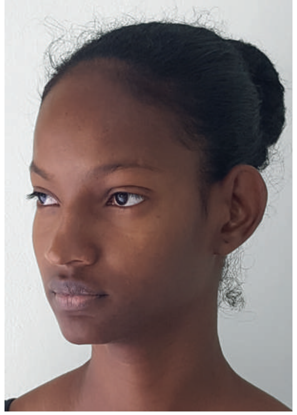
Interview by Rana Toofanian
Portrait by Luca Khouri

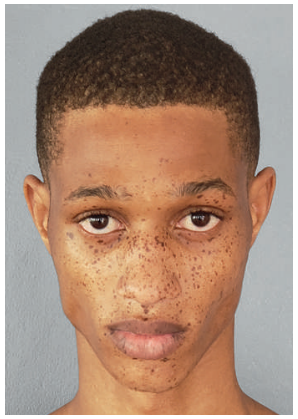












From his base in Kingston, Jamaica, Deiwght Peters has been key to the increased presence of Black models on catwalks, covers and campaigns. His agency Saint International is the biggest name in Afro-Caribbean modelling, with over 60 models under his stewardship, including Romaine Dixon, Kai Newman, and Christine Willis. Peters now works in every major market from Milan to Miami with the most prestigious houses, including Chanel, Prada, Burberry, Gucci and Celine. Eight models from Saint walked for Balenciaga's Autumn/Winter 2018 runway show alone, and the agency has established a spirited alliance with LVMH Prize-winning designer, Grace Wales Bonner.

Committed to his agency's motto of 'changing lives and expanding horizons', Saint's discoveries include Tevin Steele, a former coconut vendor from Port Antonio who debuted for Saint Laurent in 2017, and Lawrence, spotted on his way home from school, who in 2019 became the first Black cover star of *Vogue Hommes*. As the agency extends into new territories – the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Angola, Cameroon, South Africa, and France – *System* caught up with its founder to discuss his career, change, diversity, and the barriers Black models continue to face.

> **'I had already started managing a group of talented young male singers named Piano. They were like the Boyz II Men of Jamaica and did remarkably well.'**

Rana Toofanian: Saint has been around for 20 years now. Can you look back and see a turning point for you and the agency? A moment when things really took off?

Deiwght Peters: In terms of big campaigns, it all started around six years ago. We had a model go to New York, and the agent called to send her back, saying, 'The girl is too raw' and 'The client thinks she is too green'. I'll never forget it. I had read about other girls who had started out the same way; girls who couldn't speak 'proper' English, but still went on to become superstars. Why would it be any different for her, as a Black model? From when I started out, I sensed that agencies might not always support a Black model and agent. I said, 'Look, every once in a while a model comes along whose beauty transcends everything. This girl is going the be *the* one this season.' He responded, 'Do you really believe that?' And I said, 'Yes. So much so that if you send her back to Jamaica, I am just going to put her on another plane back to New York, to another agency.' Her test shoot came back two days later, and the same agent sent me the pictures. I wrote back, 'Let me go further: she is going to be a Calvin Klein exclusive this season.' So they sent her material over to Calvin Klein, and forwarded me the e-mail from the casting director the next day, saying that she was one of the most stunning models they had ever seen, and they wanted the world exclusive.

Who was the model?

Kai Newman. I knew that she was remarkably shy, but I just trusted my gut. That was a turning point for me and my relationships with agents, in that a major brand backed up what I said would happen. In New York, Kai was booked by Calvin Klein, Rodarte, Marc Jacobs, Tommy Hilfiger. From then on, the agents became very supportive. She was so new that the stylists gave her flat shoes for some of the shows, even though most of the girls were in heels. I travelled with Kai in Europe for the entire season, and she would walk in heels to make sure she got it right. We went to see Gucci in Milan – at the time it was rare for a brand-new face to be working the Gucci show – and she was booked in her very first season. By the time we got to Paris there was such an energy behind her. Everyone suddenly knew her; all the photographers, stylists and casting directors were really into her. She became the hottest new face of that season. So I started using that approach for models who came after her, like Tami Williams.

Coming from an underexposed market, did you feel that agencies, brands and casting directors were always receptive? How did you decide which to work with?

You create these relationships based on trust and your respective understanding of the markets. The first agencies I started working with were Premier in London and Why Not in Milan. One of the first agents I worked with was Matteo Puglisi. We met in Milan when he was at Major Models, then he started Future Models, and he is now the global manager for Select. With hindsight, I believe that there were agencies who might not have wanted to sign a model from me because I was Black. Let's be clear on that. I think there were also quite a few who were intrigued that I was from Jamaica. And others may have realized that I knew quite a bit, because I never walked into an agency unprepared. I understood early on what the industry expected and was amazingly organized for every meeting. That was part of how I think I broke through: agents saw that they didn't have to style my models from scratch, that they were ready to go. I'd walk in with this massive portfolio full of names, heights, measurements, photographs, and each time they'd see a face, I had a package of Polaroids ready. Many of the agents I met said that in all their years, they'd never seen such an organized presentation. They knew I was serious, and that really worked in my favour. I had also launched a collaboration with one of the top television stations in Jamaica for a summer model search across the island, which documented me finding new faces in the ghettoes, streets and rural areas.[1] This was before *America's Next Top Model*. We did the show for about six or seven years and that helped project us into certain markets. British Airways was one of the show's sponsors, and the prize-winners would often receive a return ticket to London, so agents knew that they didn't have to invest to fly the models in.

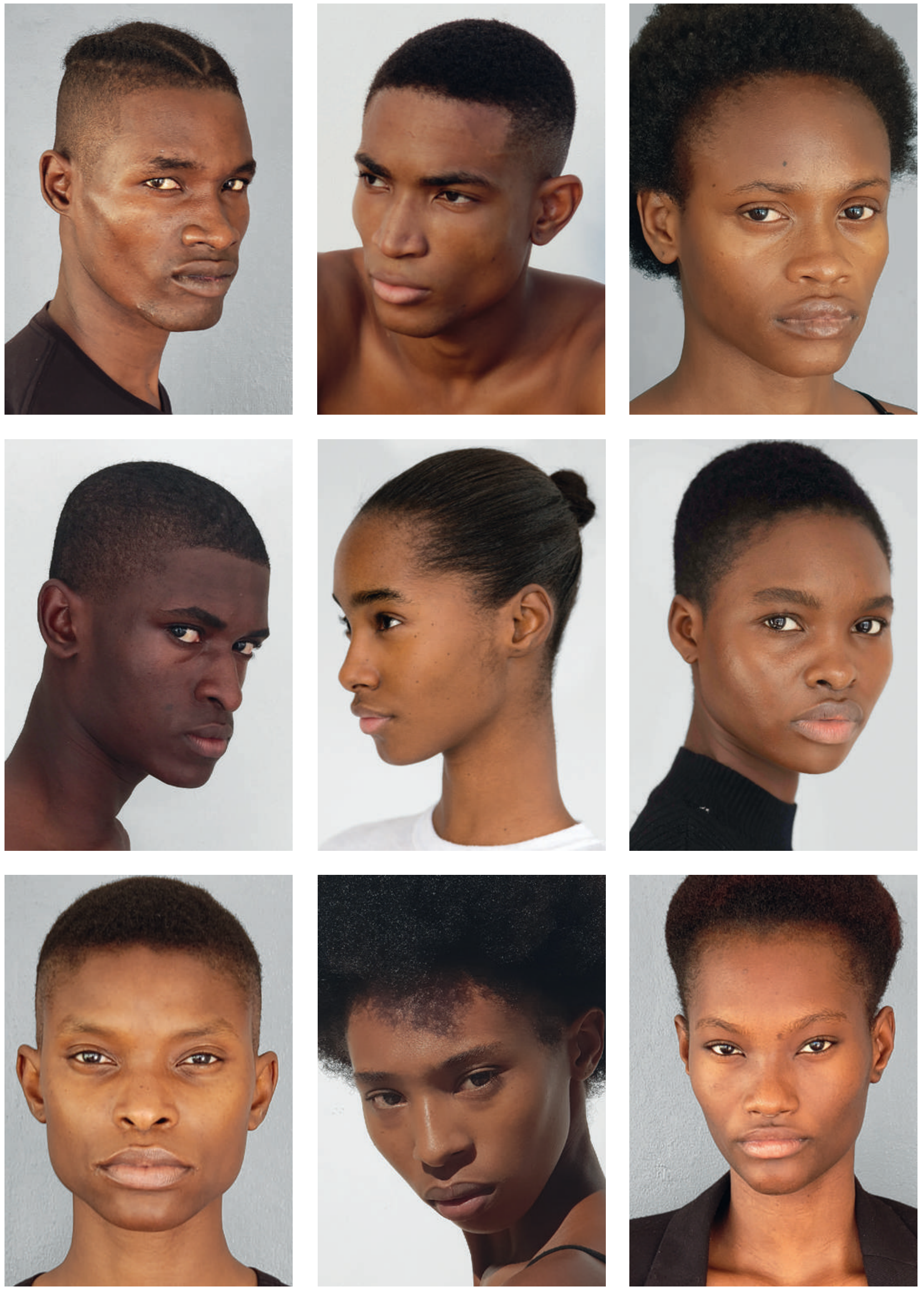
> **'Around six years ago, we had a model go to New York, and the agent called to send her back, saying, 'The girl is too raw.' I'll never forget it.'**

Let's go back a bit. Where did you grow up? What did you do before you started Saint?

I'm not from Kingston, originally; I moved here when I attended the University of the West Indies. Before that, I attended high school in my home parish, Clarendon, about a 30-minute drive from Kingston on the south coast. I did a bachelor's in management, specializing in international marketing and business. Right out of university I started working for a dynamic young bank in Jamaica, where I stayed for five years as a management associate. I actually received three job offers after my graduation, but my parents insisted I go into banking. To be honest, it worked out well: my experience with finance has served me well in terms of how I make decisions and approach operations. You understand what works and what doesn't, and how to be pragmatic in your decisions.

How did you transition from management associate to starting a modelling agency?

At the time of the financial meltdown in the Jamaican economy,[2] I had already started managing a group of talented young male singers named Piano. They were like the Boyz II Men of Jamaica and did remarkably well. I took them from scratch and developed them into a marketable commodity: a highly stylized, well-choreographed package. I called my talent company Saint. I was going through names, and I was in the bathroom and said to myself, 'Perhaps I should just use part of my own name? You are named after Saint Peter. Why not just Saint?' Saint International. At that time, a few people in the modelling industry in Jamaica approached me about getting into the business, but I wasn't interested. Then, at a talent convention in Florida for singers and models, I met Rodney Harris and his wife, who run an agency in Atlanta called Slamm Management. I had gone out to Florida for Piano, but I mentioned to Rodney that young women had approached me to manage them as models. He said, you seem to have a good eye and a passion and energy for what you do, so go for it! Rodney was instrumental in me pursuing model management. After that trip, I continued to work with the group, but also took on a few girls to see if it was something I could do. I had to learn that, for models, images are everything! I had to orchestrate photo shoots and really understand styling, make-up and grooming. A year or so on, the young female faces I was representing had become more serious than my music act. I started getting models signed all across the world. I was one of the first agents to send models from Jamaica to South Africa. Years later, I had agencies in New York asking me how to break into the South African market, because they knew I had been sending a lot of my models there for development. I invested in visiting all the markets: London, New York, Paris, Miami, Milan, Chicago. I went everywhere! As I was managing young people, it was important for me to know who the people behind these agencies were. That was a major part of our success. At the end of the day, you have to report back to the parents; they want to know that this is going to be a safe environment for their son or daughter. That sense of trust is very, very important. We recently signed Selah McHail, this young dreadlocked boy who I cast for a Wales Bonner project. When I spoke to his parents initially, I said, 'I think he is going to be a major star.' His mother said one thing: 'Deiwght, just allow him to complete school this year.' I said, 'Let's get him started once he finishes



school.' The role you play as an agent is determined by how people view you as a person, and I'm perceived as a paternal figure.

I hear they call you 'Pops'.

Yes! I started working with these kids from Nigeria, and even they started saying it. The name just comes up! Look – I've had a fantastic life. I wasn't a struggling boy from the countryside; my father was a businessman. I had a privileged life in Jamaica. I went to university. I had my own room. I never had to work until I left university. So I believe it is my responsibility to help kids who may not have had that background to get ahead in life. Many of them see this as a way out, as the ultimate opportunity. When I discovered Tevin Steele, he was a coconut vendor. I said, 'I think I can make you a star', took his digitals and posted them online. The very next day, we heard from Saint Laurent. Within two months, we were being flown to Paris, where he made his debut. It was the biggest news in Jamaica, and a hugely inspirational moment. After that, old men would come up to me and tell me the story had them in tears. Those kinds of stories help define who we are as an agency, and my motivation as an agent. I live for that kind of story.

> **'When I discovered Tevin Steele, he was a coconut vendor. I said, 'I think I can make you a star'. The very next day, we heard from Saint Laurent.'**

Your company motto is 'changing lives and expanding horizons'. I've always thought it amazing that you travel with your models. I've heard you give great pep talks!

I travel with them because I am aware that cultural differences can impact a model's ultimate success, and I want to be the point of translation, if you will. The reality is that many people would never have looked at some of these young boys and girls as models. Here in Jamaica, some of them would even be described as 'ugly'. When they start modelling, I have to do a lot of work to bring up their confidence: 'You are beautiful. You are great. You will do so well. Don't worry about what anyone else thinks. It doesn't matter where you are from, it's about where you are going.' That's the amazing thing about 'changing lives, expanding horizons'. Once they start travelling, once they start believing in themselves, that's what happens. Being able to witness that transformation is amazing. A lot of my models are not just changing their own lives, but the lives of their families, too. Christine Willis's mum passed shortly after she had debuted on a Balenciaga world exclusive, so before she started at university, she used her earnings to give her mum a wonderful send-off. These young people were once made to think they were 'lesser than'; through the experience of travelling and self-actualization, they now feel very confident.

How would you define a Saint model?

A Saint model is one who defines the times we're in. They are very prepared, very sophisticated in terms of their aesthetic, but more than that, they are aware of their roles and responsibilities. For the most part, they are Black models, so they understand that they have got to get into the game in a serious way. They have to deliver consistently at a high level, and must always maintain their integrity.

You mentioned you're working with models in Nigeria now, too.

I thought it was important to create a wider platform for Black models across the world. And what better place than Africa? We work with models of many colours, though. There are so many people across the world who have dreams and aspirations, but are told it is not possible or it is too difficult. Part of my thing is to change that idea: to let them know that it is real and doable. Until I proposed one girl to Balenciaga, I hadn't realized it was such a problem for Nigerian models to get passports and visas. They loved her, but she didn't get the visa. I reached out to a couple of contacts I had in the diplomatic corps and she came across, but we realized that this is really a common challenge. Since then, we've brought a model from Angola to Paris to meet a client. Models from Nigeria went to do Celine world exclusives and walk for Hermès. When a model from Cameroon walked for Balenciaga, it was almost like a national event. He told me, 'Pops, you won't believe it – I'm like a celebrity now!'

How did you find him?

I often check out the people who like particular posts of our models on Instagram. That's where he came from. That's also how I found Aworo Mayowa. She liked a picture of mine, I clicked on her profile and started speaking to her. In no time, we did the Balenciaga world exclusive. There's a democratization of the fashion industry through social media. Although you must remember that it helps casting directors, too, as they are not beholden to model agencies. I recall getting a DM from the stylist Lotta Volkova, like: 'I have been hearing about you and I am working on this project for Balenciaga in Paris.' I had always wanted to work with Balenciaga; I loved the aesthetic.

And now they need you, too.

I am never going to pretend to have the perfect eye, but I've tried my best over the years to understand the aesthetics of brands. As a model agent based outside of the major markets, it was always very important to me to take an intellectual approach and understand each designer and house's aesthetics and inspirations. I do extensive research. I go through 10 to 20 years of archives of shows and campaigns to see who they have used for models over the decades. So, when a talent such as Demna [Gvasalia] at Balenciaga started using my models, I was amazed, but also pleasantly surprised that he could see how their aesthetic fitted what he was trying to define at Balenciaga. Consistently every season, multiple Saint models walk for that house, or do their lookbooks or campaigns. We were doing quite a bit for Gucci as well. It's not just about being a talented scout. The visage of your models will become part of the story of an international brand, part of defining the image of that brand around the world. So you have to applaud the casting directors – Piergiorgio [Del Moro], Ashley Brokaw, and many of the other top casting directors who work closely with us – for looking outside to find models.

> **'Lots of changes have been made at the top. I no longer get e-mails saying, 'I'm looking for Black models.' Now it's, 'We are looking for great models.'**

We were introduced in 2019 when we cast two of your models based in Jamaica – Romaine Dixon and Christine Willis – for a *System* editorial in Guadeloupe with Wales Bonner and the Durimel brothers. A lot has happened since then, including your continuing collaboration with Grace Wales Bonner. She's introduced many of the new Saint faces in her shows and campaigns. How did you first meet?

When I first heard about Grace, I was like, 'Wow, this girl is a very special talent' – and even more 'wow' that she is Jamaican. Around the same time, she heard of me and reached out. We met up in London and I knew immediately that I wanted to work closely with her. I helped cast her Autumn/Winter 2019 show[3] and got the Jamaican Tourist Board to sponsor some of the models from Saint to go to London to support her. That was a big deal for her as a young designer. She was in Jamaica last year and the year before that. I organized the whole trip and made sure that she got in touch with the right people.

Grace seems to have a proclivity for nurturing the models she works with by introducing new faces, then using them across multiple seasons. As a British-Jamaican designer, she's also very much inspired by, and has a deep affinity with Jamaican culture.

The models grow with her, and she grows with them. She's unapologetic about her inspiration; her culture is her base. What appeals to me most about her work is its unpretentious, intellectual approach; it's authentic. When I saw Grace being inspired by the music and aesthetic look of 1960s and 1970s musicians and even old Jamaican actors, I thought that was so creative. It works so well for her narrative, so I think we have something going on here.

The industry has obviously advanced in the last two decades – there's a broader definition of beauty.

Which is due in part to the proliferation of social media, and in part to movements such as Black Lives Matter, which have helped open up these issues to a scale where you just cannot ignore them any more. When you speak about the democratization of fashion, you cannot underestimate how much, once upon a time, certain powers were held by certain groups. Today, one person can be so influential because they have a million followers, and those followers are invested in the narrative of their posts. Social media has a big part to play in the advancement of fashion.

Consumers around the world seem to want an increase in diversity and inclusion in fashion and luxury. Have you seen that shift really being reflected beyond the digital space, from the top?

Lots of changes have been made at the top. I no longer get e-mails saying, 'I'm looking for a Black model.' Now it's more generic: 'We are looking for models. Can you send over your package?' Even in terms of tone, it has changed for the better. Certain websites are now policing the industry; we have seen casting directors lose their jobs over the mistreatment of models. We have the power now, so get your act together. There is a broader playing field, with influential players no longer just serving to support a toxic system. I do believe that we are headed in the right direction. At certain fashion houses, the designers themselves are becoming more aware of their responsibilities. They are more culturally aware, because they were the ones blamed for the lack of diversity before. The conglomerates that own the houses also want to be perceived in a certain light. So there's a lot of moving parts within the system that will ensure that diversity and inclusion is not just a fad, but a part of our reality.

I wanted to ask you about your involvement with StyleWeek Jamaica and Arise Fashion Week in Nigeria. Nurturing designers from emerging and underexposed markets, such as the Caribbean and Africa, and putting them on the world stage, is a way of accelerating engagement.

When you understand the system, you are also better at uncovering the practical approaches you need to take in order to change it. There are talented designers all around the world, including Jamaica, so we created a platform for them through StyleWeek Jamaica.[4] We brought in writers, editors and stylists – the whole works – to witness their creativity. I brought Parsons School of Design to Jamaica, and other fashion schools, including the London College of Fashion. Many of these designers may not be in a formally structured fashion system, and therein lies the challenge. Retail is a part of the end goal of the creative work, but if there is no manufacturing system in place, if the ecosystem is not there for them, then it will be challenging. We have to be realistic about our ambitions and understand what generic systems need to be formed locally, and how we can plug into the international system to make consistent progress.

What is the future for Saint?

I'd like to see Saint playing an even bigger role in getting more minority models onto the most exclusive, luxurious and prestigious platforms in the world. I want to play a significant role in giving models from markets such as Africa access to opportunities abroad. I want to continue to develop and redefine Jamaica's position in the global fashion production scene and for it to become a destination for commercials, campaigns and lookbooks.

It seems as if Jamaica has become a key destination for many major fashion campaigns and editorials during the pandemic.

We've been very fortunate. We've done a lot of work out here this year with brands like Wales Bonner, Zara, Jonathan Simkhai. We have Jamaican photographers and creatives who are doing really well overseas and want to come home for a season and work from here. A lot of clients want to shoot here, but are sometimes concerned about the logistics, so one of our ambitions is to become a fully fledged production company to provide those services as well. We are also looking into other physical locations for Saint. We want to position ourselves in markets where we believe the talent is, so that we can be closer to them, nurture them and try to change the culture in those markets, so that they can support the local models. We're building our media capacities, too, so we can play an even more influential role developing products and properties for various different channels and platforms. I'm currently digitizing my archives from the last 20 years. I want to be a real digital company, with everything on the cloud by the spring. Just taking it to the next level.

Do you ever relax? You must have to be on your phone and e-mail a lot!

Yeah, I do! I also have a TV show *Rolling with Deiwght Peters*, which is a big deal in Jamaica, but the people we interact with on the show are not in fashion.[5] On the show, I speak to people to get insights into their lives.

Do you still see people in the street and scout them the old-school way?

We still do a lot of that. Something that really struck me even in my early days was that the schools in Jamaica would allow Saint to do model searches; even schools that had previously banned any sort of talent search. It was always amazing to go in, see a girl walking across the school playing field, and next thing you know, she's a model walking in New York Fashion Week. You have to have that credibility. You have to show people what you can do for them to believe in you.

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[1] *Faces of the Summer Model Search* premiered in 2001 and documented Peters' Jamaica-wide scout for potential models aged from 13 to 30. Those discovered on the show went on to work for Calvin Klein, Giorgio Armani, Roberto Cavalli, Kenneth Cole and Givenchy.

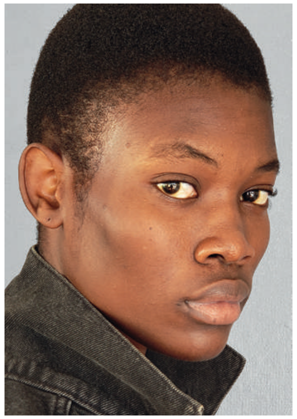
[2] Jamaica's financial crisis, one of the worst national financial crises in history, began after IMF-encouraged deregulation of the country's foreign exchange system led to the Jamaican dollar more than halving in value against the US dollar from 1989 to 1991. Over the next four years, minimal foreign-currency reserves saw the government forced to increase money supply, fuelling annual rates of inflation and interest of more than 40% and a rapid expansion of lending institutions. In 1996, these began to crash, wiping out 44% of GDP and leaving Jamaica one of the most indebted countries in the world.

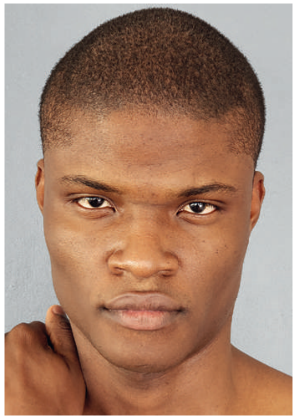
[3] Grace Wales Bonner's Autumn/Winter 2019 collection debuted at London Fashion Week and was inspired by yearbooks from Howard University, an historically Black institution in Washington, D.C. The show was accompanied by a reading by Nigerian poet and novelist Ben Okri.

[4] Organised by Saint International, StyleWeek Jamaica is an annual event of symposiums, masterclasses, and shows for fashion creatives in Kingston. The most recent Arise Fashion Week took place in December 2020 in Lagos, Nigeria, and showcased 30 young, mainly African designers.

[5] *Rolling With Deiwght Peters* is a one-hour variety show on Jamaican television channel TVJ, a mix of celebrity interviews, behind-the-scenes exclusives, and pop culture.

Portrait stylist: Kadeem Rodgers. Model images courtesy of Saint International, except Tami Williams at The Society Management, Barbara Lee at New York Model Management and Jalon Chin-Wilson at Anthm New York.





Jamaica

Fantasea

In Jamaica, dancehall culture reimagined.

Photographs by Luca Khouri
Styling by Marika-Ella Ames

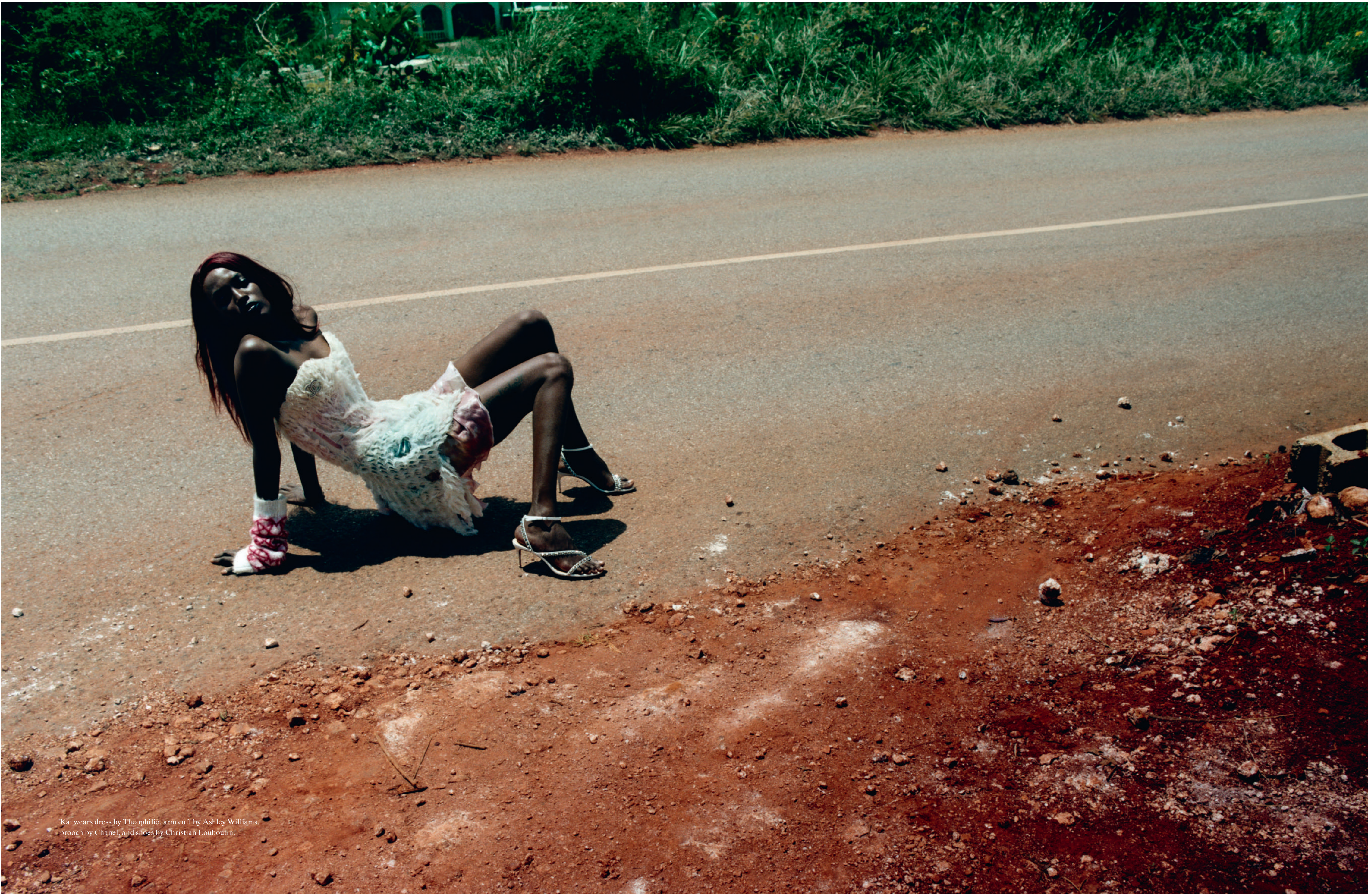
Previous page: Marieka wears dress by Conner Ives, vintage bodysuit by Found And Vision, necklace by Brooke Callahan, and vintage shoes by Jade Palace.

This page: Marieka wears dress by Mark Fast.

Right: Breana wears bra by Katya Zelentsova, skirt by Jacquemus, body chain by Alighieri, and shoes by Bottega Veneta.

Left: Breana wears dress by Bottega Veneta and shoes by Mugler.

This page: Kai wears bodysuit by Katya Zelentsova and vintage bikini bottoms by Found And Vision.



Kai wears dress by Theophilio, arm cuff by Ashley Williams, brooch by Chanel, and shoes by Christian Louboutin.

This page: Kai wears a dress by Molly Goddard and shoes by Prada.

Right: Breana wears top and trousers by Acne Studios and fishnet tights by Wolford.

Previous page: Breana wears top by Gucci,
skirt by Valentino and accessory on skirt by MM6.

Left: TC wears dress by Marni and earrings by Hugo Kreit.

This page: Marieka wears jacket and bodysuit by Isabel Marant.

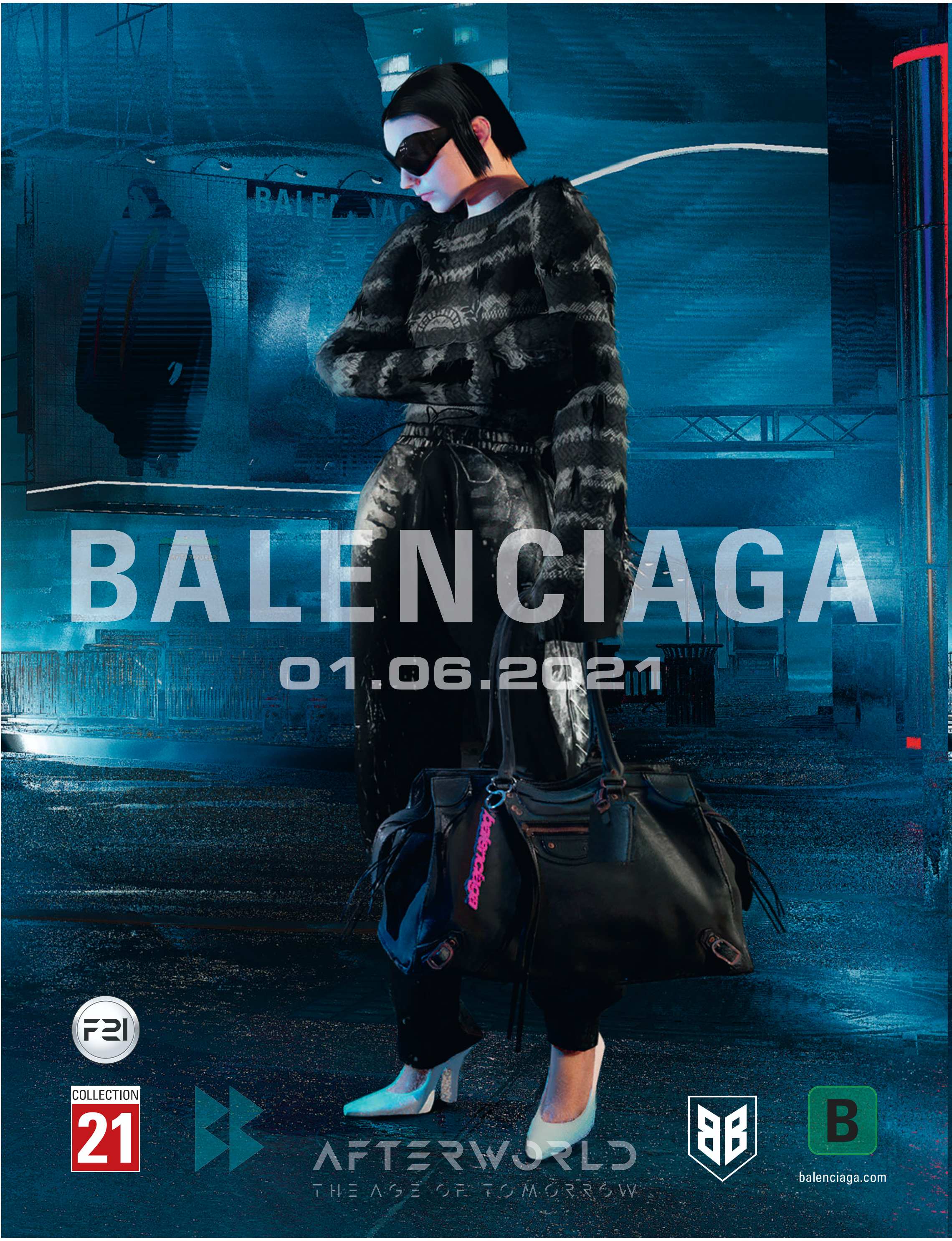
This page: Breana wears a dress by Supriya Lele.

Right: Kai wears dress by Alexander McQueen and shoes by Bottega Veneta.

Previous page: TC wears dress by Mark Fast, earrings by Hugo Kreit,
shoes by Isabel Marant, and her own necklace.

This page: Marieka wears dress by Maison Davide Bazzerla, skirt by Mark Fast, necklace by Chopova Lowena,
vintage rings from Contemporary Wardrobe, and shoes by Giuseppe Zanotti.

Models: Breana Carson, Kai Newman, Marieka Marston at Saint International. Hair: Tamar Duncan. Make-up: Teeah Anderson. Photography assistant: JP Williams.
Styling assistants: Kadeem Rodgers, Alice Abbey-Ryah, Ady Razor Huq, Benoît Paquet. Hair assistant: Nasheka McDonald. Jamaica production: Carleene Samuels at Creative Source.
London production: Jonathan Tusder at Canvas Rep. Special thanks: Deiwght Peters, Jakes Treasure Beach, Howard Walker.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‘It can still be luxury without being elitist.’

Long empowered by their Instagram followers, New York duo Area are now shaking up couture.

Interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist
Photographs by Brianna Capozzi
Styling by Akeem Smith

For eight years, New York label Area has defied the traditional logic of the fashion world. With no big-name backer and precious little marketing spend, its fame and sales ride on its fans: Kendall Jenner, Ariana Grande, Bella Hadid, Indya Moore, Michelle Obama, to name only a few. Founded in 2013 by Parsons School of Design graduates Beckett Fogg and Piotrek Panszczyk, and inspired by the devil-may-care aesthetic of the eponymous 1980s Lower Manhattan nightclub, Area projects a fascination with textile development onto exuberant ready-to-wear and high-glam accessories draped in duchesse satin, lamé, and the brand's signature crystals. Told by the industry that its work was unsellable, Area sold it in spades. Most baffling of all, perhaps, is the label's lack of a grand plan. Instead, Fogg and Panszczyk prefer to keep tabs on their social media, watch the whims of their audience, and follow their own followers.

'You almost have to be naive, especially in New York, to launch a brand, if you don't have a particular last name or an absurd budget.'

And so in 2021, with the industry forced online, Area took a provocative swerve into the hallowed world of haute couture. As the Spring/Summer 2021 show season drew to a close, the brand stepped in with an unofficial entry: an audacious first couture collection showcased in a statement video starring models Precious Lee and Yasmin Wijnaldum. In conversation with leading arts curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, Beckett Fogg and Piotrek Panszczyk discuss elitism, club culture, and what makes crystals so very special.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Let's begin at the beginning. How did you come to fashion? How did you decide to join forces and work together? Was it an epiphany or a gradual process?

Piotrek Panszczyk: It was a very gradual process, with epiphanies here and there. My first years in art school were, like, 'Oh my God, why am I here? What do I want to do?' I was born in Poland under Communism, and from a very young age I saw women hungry for fashion and self-expression that was out of reach. They could see it, but it was unattainable, so a lot of people mobilized themselves and started crafting. My aunts, grandmas, uncles – they were all in fashion, all making clothes for other people. They had it in their blood. That was my first connection with it. You didn't really have to have a lot, but you could be creative. My aunts were all so glamourous. We lived in a tiny industrial city with nothing going on, but they had this spark in them. I realized you could create yourself through fashion; you could make your own well-being through fashion.

Beckett Fogg: When we started we were both quite young and definitely a bit naive, but you almost have to be naive, especially in New York, to launch a brand without a specific last name or an absurd budget. What drew us to each other was textile development and visual identity; when you look at something, it needs to be instantly recognizable before you see the label.

Piotrek: We both came to New York to do an MFA at Parsons, which was a new international programme: Shelley Fox started it; she came from London to work on it. Beckett was in the first year and was the only American alongside 18 international students; I was in the second year. We could walk into each other's classrooms and look at each other's work; Shelley really encouraged that. Beckett was embossing things, things were appearing out of nothing in 3D, and I was shaving away old, recycled thrift. Weirdly, we saw a connection there, in what you can do and manipulate through textiles. That was the very organic way we started working together.

Beckett: When we talked about starting a concept, it was so exciting. We went the opposite way to typical New York companies. For both of us it was really important not to be too, 'This is what Area needs to be…' We came up in the age of Instagram, and we allow our audience, our community of supporters, to dictate what Area becomes. That is where the name came from. We wanted something that was like a blank slate, a starting place. That is how we view textiles as well: something you can put your own stamp on. Around that time, a book about the club Area came out, which was super inspiring for us.[1] We always reference it. It was a coincidence, but it has become ingrained into our identity, as well.

Piotrek: Area the club was like a block and a half down from us. I remember when we were sourcing fabrics in midtown, just trying to get something off the ground, all these old fabric vendors were, like, 'Wait, the club Area is back?' Area was this amazing creative force. Every weekend it had a different theme, it innovated itself; it was like culture digested and examined, and that was so inspiring for us.

All clothes by Area, couture collection, Spring/Summer 2021

‘We came up in the age of Instagram, and so we really allow our audience, our community of supporters, to dictate what Area becomes.’

I wanted to ask, who inspires your thinking about fashion, in terms of your peers and previous generations?
Piotrek: The way we consumed fashion and showed it to people was steered in a certain direction and was quite white-washed, like, you had to be a certain woman of a certain physique to be able to enjoy fashion or even to be chic. That has become a source of inspiration: how can we look at classic luxury, classic ideas of beauty – duchesse silk, YSL – and refocus that? Because when we look at our customer, she is interested in all of that as well, but maybe isn’t from X, Y, or Z. Why only show this type of girl? Why not this other girl, who maybe has more personality? Connecting with our customers is so important: their messages, their concerns, their issues, where they are from. We can analyse that. How does a woman see that dress? Does she wear it with heels or combat boots? These simple, logical things can also be part of the fantasy.
Beckett: Piotrek does whole days of historical research. We love to go to libraries, contextualizing and addressing conversations we have had on social media with our customers.
Piotrek: As a person who enjoys the history of fashion, research is such a source of opportunity. Looking at the 1960s or the 1950s or the 1800s, there is always some parallel in how an idea was being thought about. That is truly exciting to us. How can we study this material, learn everything about it, then break the rules?

Because of the club, your brand name is deeply associated with the 1980s. I spoke the other day to Honey Dijon, whose working practice grew out of 1980s club culture. Sadly, I didn’t experience New York in the 1980s, but Honey was saying how all the worlds came together. Togetherness is what we are missing so much now with the Covid-19 crisis, but more generally, something like those 1980s clubs is difficult to find today. What did you think was missing when you started Area?
Piotrek: It is about this idea of togetherness. I really think togetherness means contrast and being able to accept and love each other’s contrasts.
Beckett: With the end product, it is so inspiring when someone recognizes a reference, and then someone else looks at the exact same product and sees a completely different reference. We celebrate these differences.
Piotrek: We love quality, but hate elitism; it’s just about putting in an effort. It can still be luxury and high-end and amazing without being elitist. That is what I loved about the club: the idea of being this night star, where you walk into the room and demand attention. The eyes are on you; you are the queen of the night. People don’t know anything about you, they just know you are beautiful. Some might see only the superficial side of that, but there is something iconic about it, and it is so New York.

Area in the 1980s was an institution, a symbol of a moment when clubbing was an art form. Warhol did the *Invisible Sculpture* installation there. It had themes: Confinement – very timely for now – Future, Suburbia. They would change every few weeks.
Piotrek: The art direction of the whole club was phenomenal. For our first show, we actually mimicked Area’s first invite, which was a Xanax pill in a glass of water that opened up and became an invitation.[2] It was as glamorous as Studio 54, but different and grittier. From age 16 to 19, I worked at a club in Rotterdam similar to this. It was all art-based; every week, we would change the theme. At that time, there was this sense of nightlife, and you could feel it. We were on flyers throughout the city. People were known in this micro-community for being night icons.

Which were the first designs in which you feel you found your language? When did that first kick in?
Piotrek: The first collection was experimental. We were two young kids with not a lot of money, and we had to quickly find a way to make some. We had that love of textile development, so we thought, how could we apply that to something as mundane as a T-shirt, for instance? We started thinking, ‘OK, what if we fold a T-shirt in a neat square, and emboss the T-shirt in a flat plastic bag.’ We went to a factory for embossing leather in New Jersey that usually makes fake snake print, and we decided to create a Braille-like texture and embed that into a T-shirt. When the machine opened, what came out was this amazingly intricate, plastic, textured piece of square with a flat pack T-shirt in it. Opening Ceremony saw them and they were obsessed. When you opened the plastic, it literally makes a sound. Each T-shirt has a positive and

negative texture on it that evaporates over time when you wash it, and you are left with a ripped T-shirt, so it becomes quite punk, quite fast. We sold 2,000 T-shirts in the first year, so from the get-go we had a product that sold. Then we were like, ‘OK, we have this super-expensive lamé from Lyon, from one of the oldest mills. How can we use it?’ We made mini tube tops out of it, and all of a sudden this couture fabric became a millennial, Gen-Z top.
Beckett: We switched the grain, so even though it is a really expensive fabric, we were able to keep the quantity so low that the product didn’t need to be a thousand dollars; it could be $400. We started seeing that it could still be quality, but it needed to be done cleverly, so that young people could actually own it.
Piotrek: Buyers were not interested: ‘Who is this glamazonian? This is not realistic. No one wants to look like this.’ But once we put it out there people were really requesting it and constantly asking for it. We made a suit hand-embroidered with crystals to make a pin stripe. We were working with Charlotte Wales, the photographer friend of ours who was also just starting out, and she took amazing pictures of this suit. Bella Hadid saw it and started wearing it and then it went crazy and the suit was just not available. We were, like, ‘Oh fuck, we made something, but now people cannot buy it. How can we get smart about this?’ So that pinstripe became a tracksuit with a crystal stripe, and it came with a sweater and a bustier. And people were like, ‘OK, I can be lightly glamorous. I don’t have to go all out.’ With everything that seems complicated, we try to figure out a way to do it so it can become a signature. We had to fail a lot of times, too! That is how we started building these signatures: a lamé boob top; a crystal-fringed, cut-out T-shirt; a crystal mule; a tweed mini set with jewelled embellishment; and then a bowl skirt made of duchesse. All these pieces just became their own collection.

Like with art exhibitions, some fashion shows really mark a moment. Among your shows, which, for you, produced such a moment?
Piotrek: Fall 2018 was a moment. We did this show in the Deutsche Bank building…
Beckett: We agonized over the location; it couldn’t just be anywhere. This venue: yes, it is the lobby of a bank, but it is also a public atrium, a subway entrance. It was where Occupy Wall Street were.[3]
Piotrek: This very iconic 1980s architect designed it, and it is like a futuristic Miami.[4] We were such a small team. Every collection we were learning something new, but when we got to that show, we thought ‘OK, these are our fabrics, these are the graphics we like, these are crystals we love, and this is our casting.’ People were suddenly woken up, where before people were not taking it seriously. New York has a long queue and is so political, and things can stay underground for a long time. It is really about that upper layer, but we didn’t want to be part of that.
Beckett: You can pay to have a platform, but then it is more challenging to get the credibility.
Piotrek: And we were not those kinds of people. We might fail, but at least we tried. In this show, the whole language came together. There were these oversized hoops, and the metallic fabrics and the crystal elements.

Can you talk about these features? Because they seem to be recurrent. I am particularly interested in the crystals.
Piotrek: In the beginning, we didn’t really understand why we liked them so much, but we always had this sentimental connection with jewellery. All the jewellery I own was given to me by my parents or loved ones. And also, historically, what it means in certain cultures, like crown jewels, a status symbol. But also *not* a status symbol…
Beckett: Because crystals are like the fake version of these treasures. Are they couture? Are they high street? Are they fake diamonds? Are they Swarovski? I think people bring so much of their own history.
Piotrek: People get nervous: are they fake or real? We saw tension between what is seen as couture and what is seen as mass-produced, and how that weirdly interconnects. Then when we had them in our hands, we started understanding that we liked them in a chain form, but it is actually a modular form that has its own properties.
Beckett: We are still learning so much about them. There is so much each season and it keeps building up.
Piotrek: Even Swarovski are now, like, ‘Oh my God, we have never done this.’

Would you both say that you are making clothes for more discerning and more assertive people? How do you go beyond binaries in your fashion?

‘Many young people are no longer into fast fashion; they want to know how complex and elaborate something can be. It’s about a pure love of the craft.’

Piotrek: First of all, I really do think that Area is an acquired taste. We like it that some people might not like it.

Beckett: It's more about power, and not about gender or how feminine you are. It is more interesting when there is a huge spectrum of people who are attracted to it, but all are strong individuals.

Piotrek: Exactly. Our clientele is so diverse; from super young to 80-plus, with extremely diverse bodies, diverse lives. Obviously, we have a strong opinion of what we think is good, but it is really about listening to them and saying, 'OK, so you don't like to show your arms? Well, we have an amazing top for you.'

Beckett: It is about really being proud of your achievements, about celebrating your confidence. We are not catering to one person in one place, which is why we are resonating in so many different parts of the world.

'We really wanted to do couture. Did we have a billion dollars in order to do couture? No! But did that mean we couldn't start doing it?'

Has social media played a role in the development of your brand?

Piotrek: Honestly, us and social media, I think it was just meant to be. When we started, I had just started dating my husband, Kareem, who is in charge of our whole digital side. We started slowly, built a visual identity that people could understand, and people gave us feedback and started to follow us. The turning point was almost eight years ago. Kim [Kardashian] wore our fur bra and in the same week Bella Hadid wore another one of our looks, and we thought about how our Instagram could become almost like a tabloid. We started putting our stuff in rows of paparazzi pictures of these girls getting out of a car, almost like the iconic Meisel shoot for *Vogue Italia*.[5] Then, it was like, how can we use images that are out there, and start curating them? Kareem really has a knack for that, things like girls stepping on gum or a twisted shoe.

Beckett: And looking at what people are attracted to and why, and thinking about that when we produce our own content.

Piotrek: In our first years, we were going to the salons in Paris, and we had one or two appointments and sometimes no one came. We were sitting there almost crying, but then we were like, we have this fur bra and these jumpsuits. So Beckett put it all on, we cropped it, made videos, put them on Instagram and they started flying all over the world. We are like our own magazine: we have our own visuals, we reach out to photographers who we love, like Paul Kooiker.[6] We want to make work that exudes this energy.

Can you talk about the latest collection?

Piotrek: This collection was conceived in the height of the pandemic. Just before the lockdown we were, like, 'There is something with this fashion system that doesn't sit right.' I think the lockdown really gave us a chance to ask, 'How can we do things in our own way?' Honestly, with the stores, it was a mess; no one knew what they were doing. Buyers were still asking for the same things.

Beckett: They didn't know how long it was going to go on for.

Piotrek: Everyone was like, 'We want jersey, we want comfortable, practical', but our e-commerce was the complete opposite: people were buying lamé, crystal hairpieces, high glamour. That was a weird disconnect, like it was spiralling out of control. So we started to think of this spiral – you can build it into a breast-like shape – and how that could stand for these times. We started thinking about workwear and Prince of Wales check suits, but we cut the sleeves and the lapels off. We made breast coils. Crystal was the biggest thing for us, but how could we give the stores something soft? There were these iconic pieces that we had already created, like a braided crystal couture dress in our Fall 2020 show, which were super intricate. We took that piece, put it on a mannequin, photographed it, printed it, scanned it in again and screen-printed it on a T-shirt dress and gown, and it became this memory of what fancy couture was. It almost looked like a nostalgic band T-shirt. The same for the dress: we did all the same things and it ended up looking like armour, but you could do yoga and sports in it. It was about pushing these core elements in different ways and keeping them simple and casual.

Do you have any unrealized projects?

Beckett: There are a lot! Just looking at the desk right now, there are crystal carcasses everywhere from seasons before. The crystals are modular, so these little pieces are not discarded; they become the starting points and elements that we build from.

Piotrek: We are really hungry for places and people and institutions who are ambitious and will say, 'Let's do it!' We really wanted to do couture. Did we have a billion dollars to do couture? No! But did that mean we couldn't?

The epicentre of couture lies in Paris, in a centralized model that doesn't correspond to a more decentralized notion of the world. How can one deal with such a conservative notion?

Piotrek: That is a really good point. Couture is so heavy; it is the establishment, basically. But before we even started thinking about that, we were doing the work. We are passionate craftsmen who are excited by the actual handwork. And when we made the decision to do couture, we thought, 'Do we even need to go to Paris?' Someone in France decided that haute couture lives in Europe, but to me it has a much deeper past, like ancient civilizations, something from the core of your heart…

Beckett: The ultimate expression.

Piotrek: Exactly. Globally, in so many places people are really good at specific things. Like, a certain type of embroidery in southern China is way more intricate and specific than a certain embroidery in India. These nuances are so diverse and rich. That liberated us and made us think: is couture purer and democratic? Is it more about dedication to that kind of work? It was also: can we do this in New York? We started and everyone who was part of the project dedicated months to it; everyone was so proud of the pieces. That process of conceiving clothes was so encouraging. Many young people are no longer into fast fashion; they want to know how complex and elaborate something can be. That, to us, is what couture is: a pure love for the craft. Going back to bodies: we started looking at mannequins, and how deeply ingrained this visual of a mannequin is in women's psyches. A lot of people probably have eating disorders without even knowing because of the way fashion, for years, has presented a certain image to people. I have a lot of friends who, because of the images that they always consumed, now have this annoying thing in their 40s and just cannot be happy about themselves. And that troubled us. A couture client is usually not that mannequin; it is normally an older lady who is loaded and who could eat all day and still be fabulous! We just started seeing it as so homogenized, and understanding that couture could speak to different shapes.

Beckett: One thing about couture is this made-to-measure aspect. I mean, why would you not celebrate all of the different bodies and different ways that you can make garments?

Piotrek: Having someone with a lot of breast and a belly, that is when you have to understand the body and gravity and fabric. Is it heavy? Is it compact? All of these very subtle things become important. It becomes like sculpture. It was liberating for us to do, because we are so passionate about it.

'Someone in France decided that haute couture lives in Europe, but to me it has a much deeper past, like ancient civilizations.'

What is your opinion about the Fédération de Haute Couture de la Mode? Could the new wave that you have launched create a counter-model? Could the new school produce a new organization?

Piotrek: If that happens, I hope it would not be a federation, but an old-school guild with craftsmen coming together to say, 'This is what we have – what do we need to do to survive?' Not this bullshit elitism. When we started talking about couture, we didn't want to ruffle their feathers. When I started consuming fashion, obviously I was captivated by YSL, Ungaro, so many others, and I wanted that beauty and art. Actually, we approached the Fédération and told them that we want to do this, would you be open to hosting us – this was before the pandemic – and they were, like, 'Come to Paris.' They have such a rich culture in fashion; they know where everything comes from, technically. Could that become more like a platform where you help young people to thrive? Because there are not many people who want to be a *première* or a seamstress or a pattern maker. I think it is important for the Fédération to see that and to educate these people, and make sure the craft doesn't die, because if it does then they will also disappear.

Beckett: Just like it's important to celebrate all of the other places around the world that make these beautiful pieces. If it all goes back to being in-person with a runway show, a salon, a presentation, a showroom, we don't always want to be locked into Paris again. Why can't it be in Copenhagen, Shanghai or Moscow? What are their techniques, their crafts, their heritage?

Piotrek: You can call it institution or you can call it dictatorship, but institutions can realize that they were part of a problem and think, 'Oh, we could do it differently, we have the capacity to fix it.'

One last thing: there is this little book by Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*. What would be you say to

a young fashion student in 2021?

Piotrek: See the power that fashion has, the effect it can have on people's lives. It can create jobs; it can create self-esteem. Be respectful, but stick to your guts and guns and know that it is not going to happen overnight. It needs to season and you don't need to know everything from the get-go. Fashion is such an internal thing and maybe it is good that you don't know in the moment what you are exactly.

Beckett: You have to be open to things coming your way that you didn't expect. It is so much better when things happen that you don't expect, and you have to respond to them. That is when the best opportunities happen.

Piotrek: And take all these opportunities and risks while you are still a student. Don't later look back and think, 'Fuck, I didn't do it.' Instead, be like, 'I did it, it didn't work.' Two years later, you are still only 24 and things are good.

Model: Kirsten Owen at Ford. Hair: Ward at The Wall Group. Make-up: Fara Homidi at Together. Casting: Evelien Joos. Producer: Chloe Mina at Lolly Would.
Lighting technician: Eduardo Silva. Photography assistants: Alonso Ayala, Adam Kim. Styling assistant: Kenny Paul. Make-up assistant: Miki Ishikura.

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1. An oral and visual history of the legendary club, *Area: 1983-1987* shows Area's place at the heart of a brilliant downtown New York creative scene. First published in 2013, the book reveals the wide (and wild) cross-section of the city – including stars such as Andy Warhol, Dolph Lundgren, Grace Jones and Prince – drawn in by the club's reputation and unique concept: every six weeks, Area was gutted and redecorated with a new high-concept theme, such as Suburbia, Natural History, and American Highway.

2. Area was known for its inventive invitations, which changed with each decorative theme. For Natural History, the invitation was printed on the *inside* of an egg, while for the opening night, it was a pill that when dissolved revealed the details of the event in the water.

3. Occupy Wall Street was a protest movement against the wealth inequality caused by the financial sector and highlighted by the 2008 economic crash; it began with the occupation of Zuccotti Park near Wall Street in September 2011.

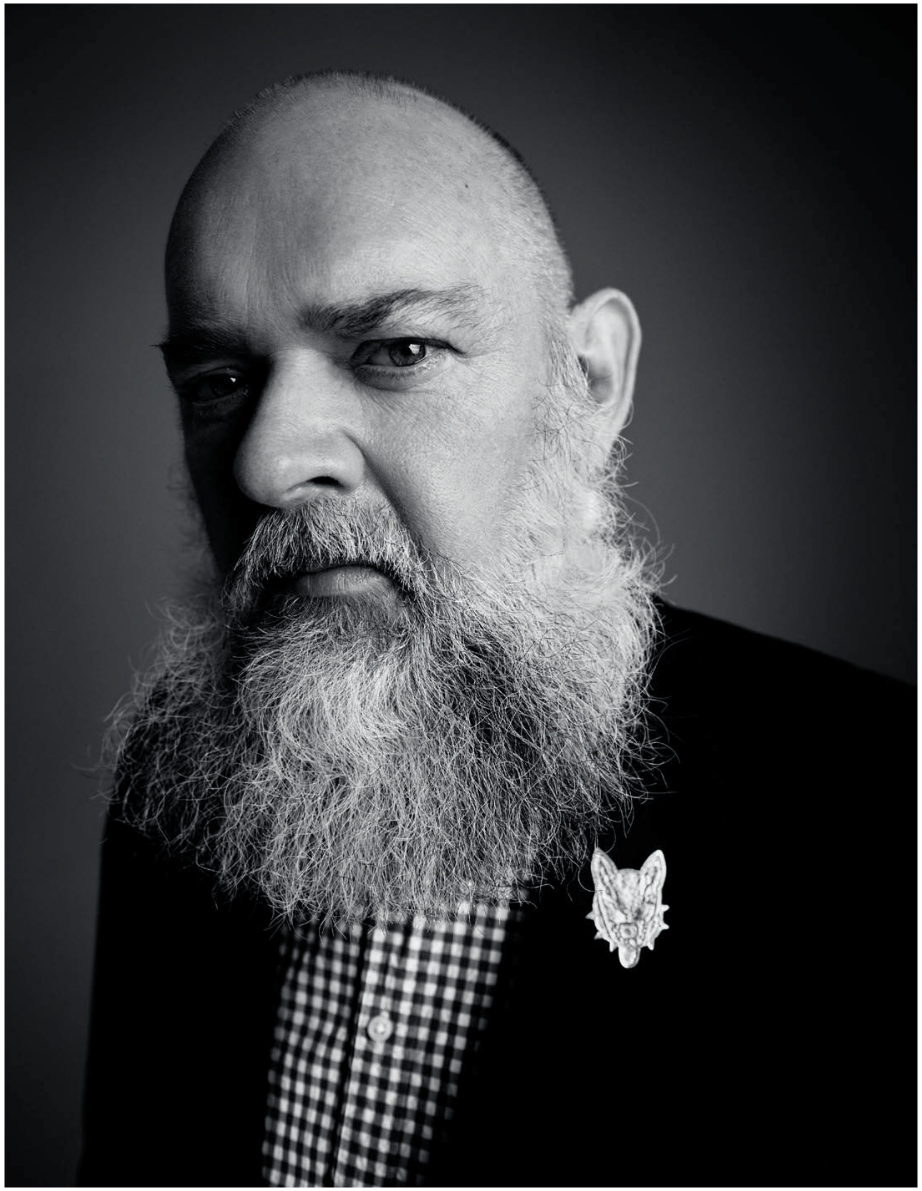
4. Home to Deutsche Bank from 2001 until its move to Columbus Circle in 2021, the 47-storey tower, named 60 Wall Street, was finished in 1989. An excellent example of laboured 1980s post-modernism, it incorporates randomly chosen elements of classical architecture into an anonymous mirrored-glass, corporate aesthetic. The lobby, which is a semi-public space and was a base for the Occupy Wall Street movement, is a marble-covered amalgam of 1980s angularity overlaid with an utterly arbitrary nod to ancient Egyptian architecture.

5. For the January 2005 issue of *Vogue Italia*, Steven Meisel shot a fashion story entitled 'Celebrity', a parody of paparazzi-style photography, styled by Edward Enninful.

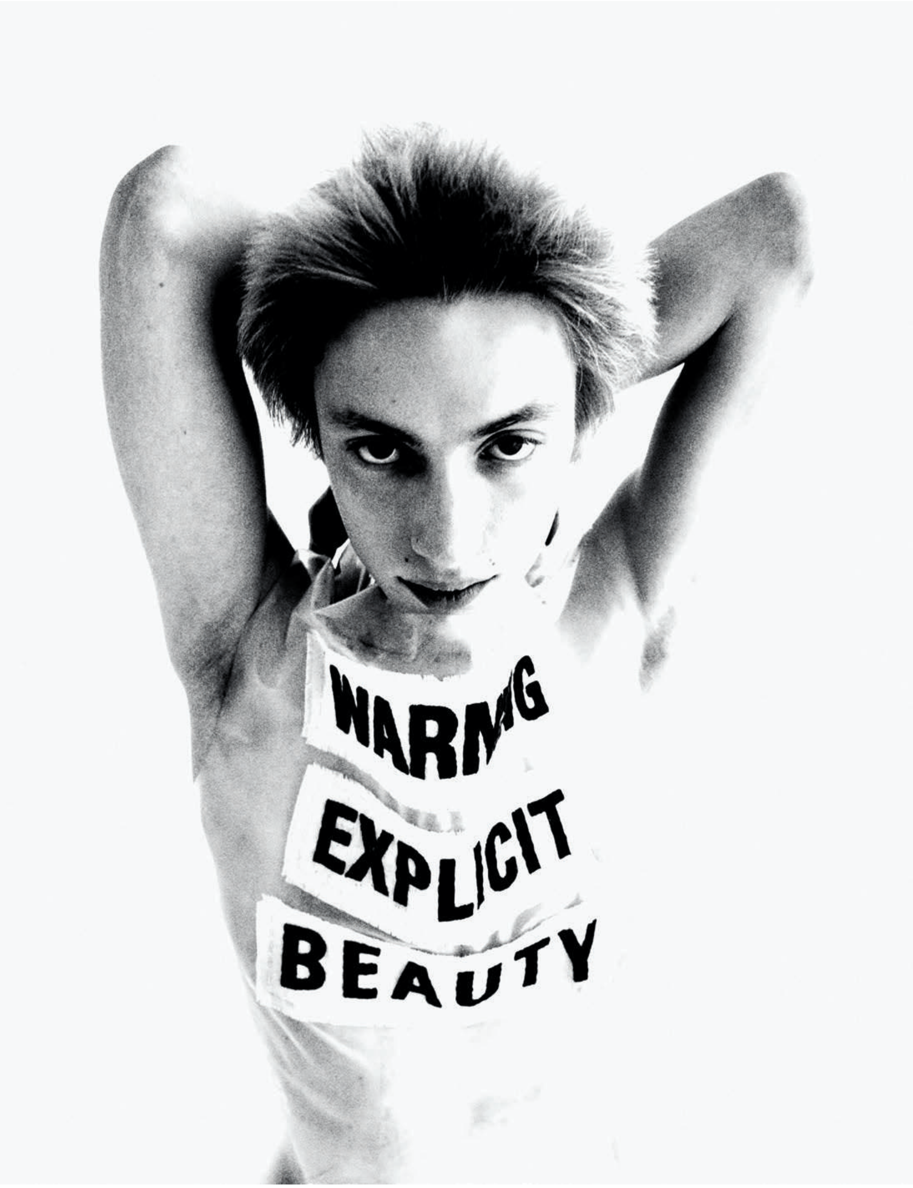
6. Dutch artist Paul Kooiker (born 1964) is known for his photographs, often of female nudes, that are highly reworked and then placed into fictional, quasi-narrative 'collections' of installations and photobooks.

‘I always wanted to be a pop star, but could never sing.’

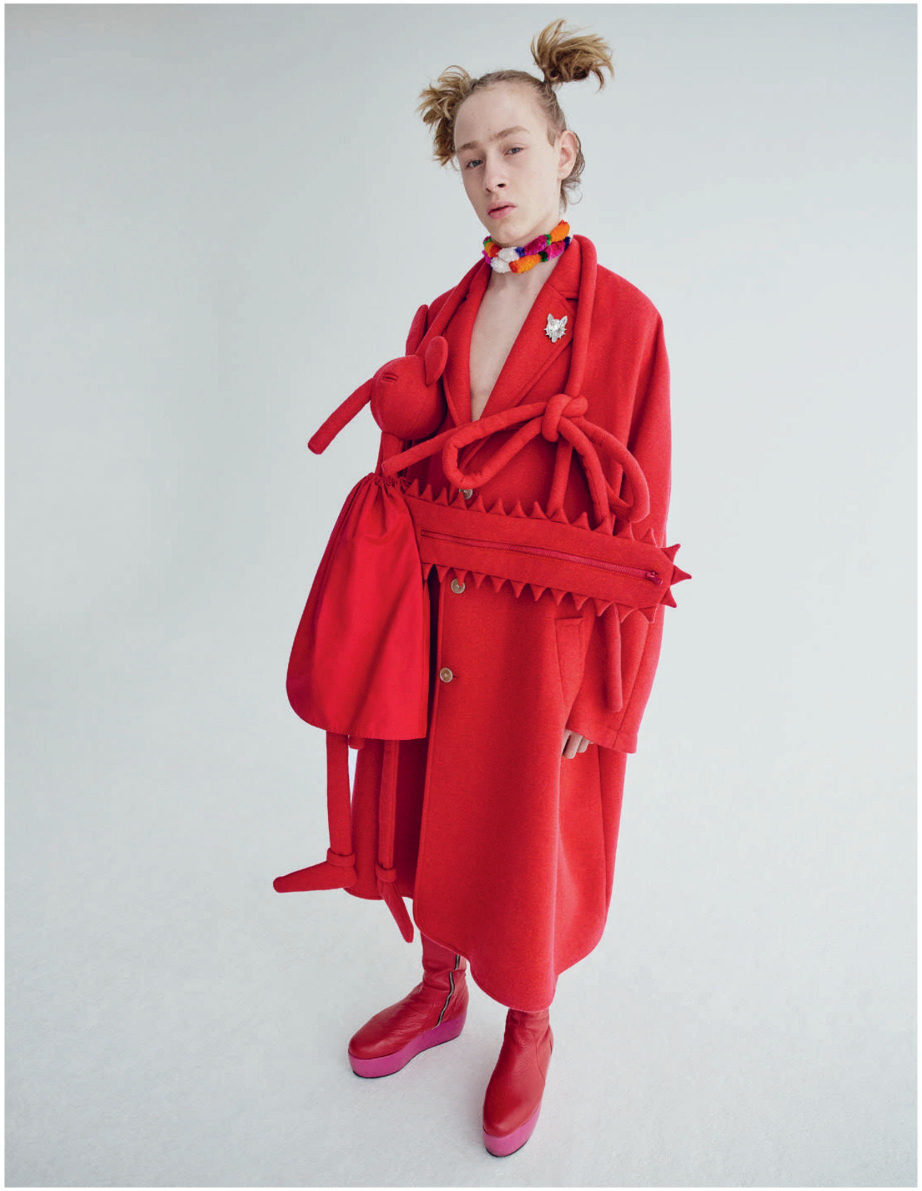
The darkness and lightness of Walter Van Beirendonck’s life in fashion.



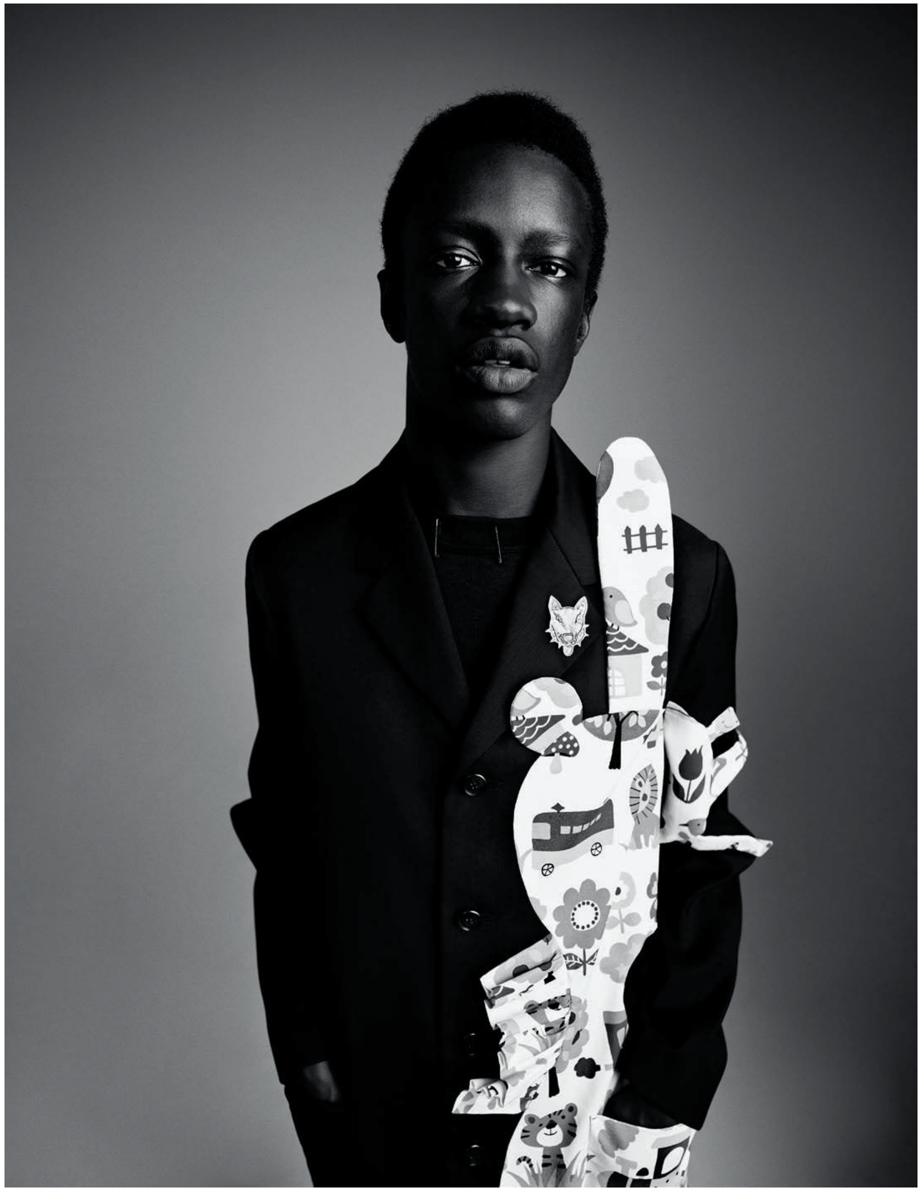
By Tim Blanks
Photographs by Willy Vanderperre
Styling by Olivier Rizzo


WARNING
EXPLICIT
BEAUTY

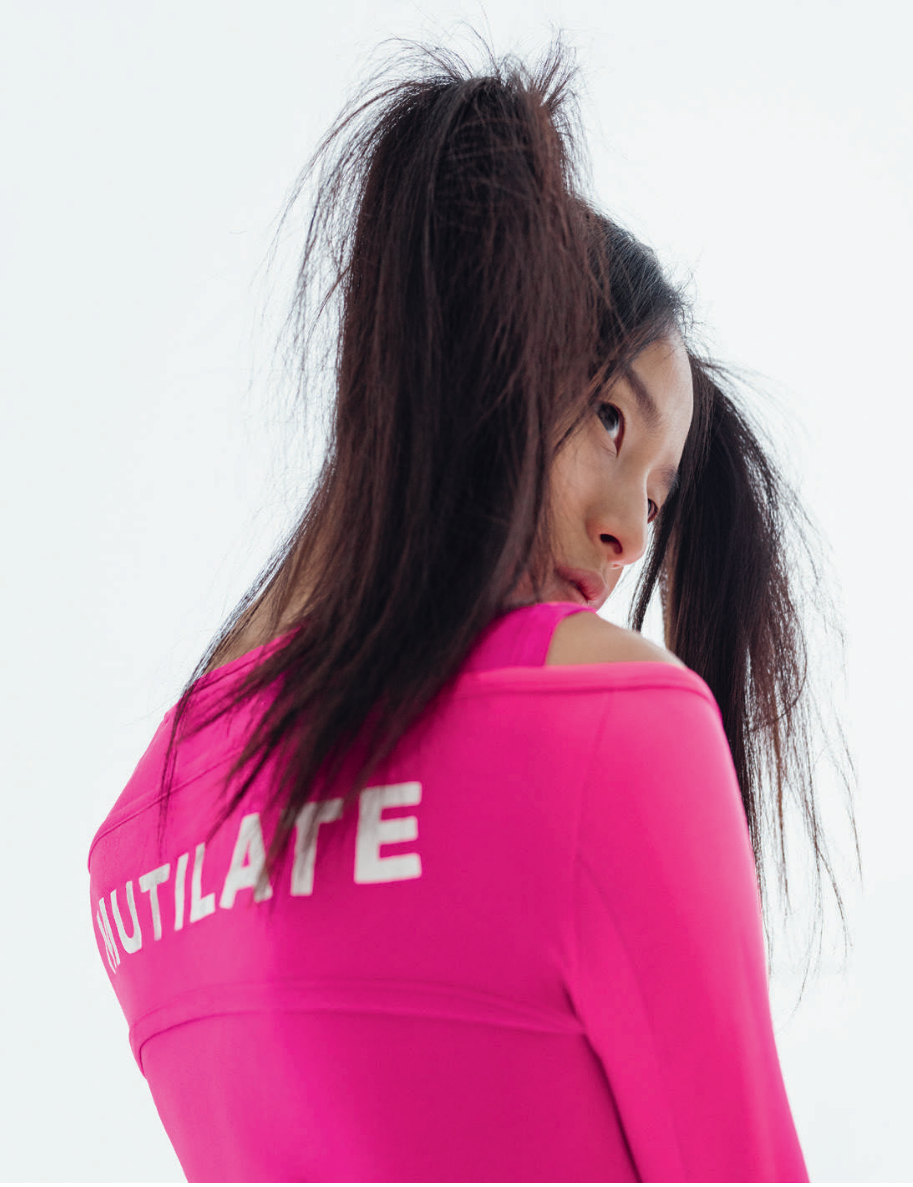
Lennert wears embroidered plastic mini-dress, *Explicit Beauty*,
Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 2015-2016.



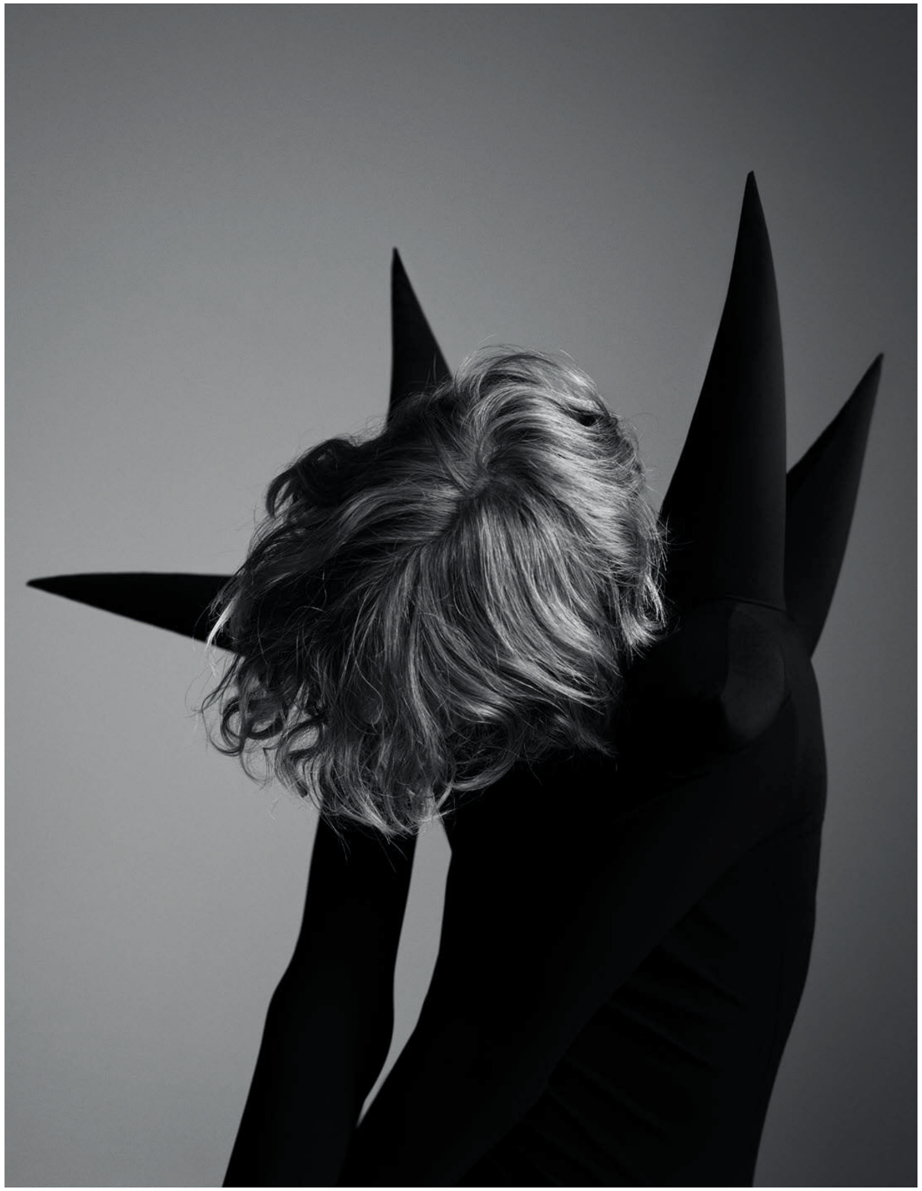
Oskar wears wool coat with matching 3-D sculptural accessories, *Woest*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 2016/17;
original Indian-jewel necklace, *Wow*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 2019/20;
Sado brooch, *Shoot the Sun, Shoot the Moon, Be a Star*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 1988-1989;
and leather platform boots, *Hardbeat*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 1989-1990.



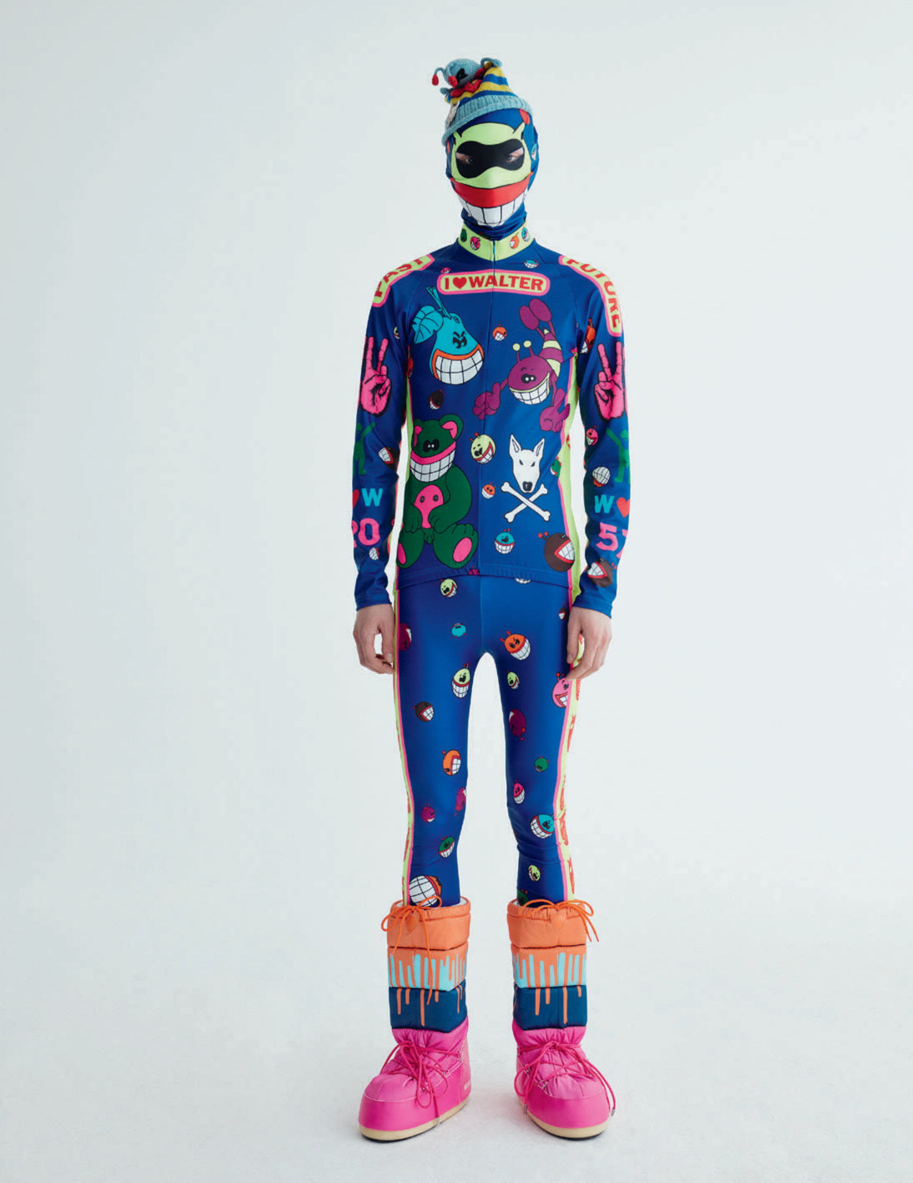
Mohamadou wears wool blazer with printed cotton sculptural insert, *Electric Eye*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Spring/Summer 2016;
dissected long-sleeved cotton T-shirt with safety pins, *The Big Bang*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 1990-1991;
and Sado brooch, *Shoot the Sun, Shoot the Moon, Be a Star*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 1988-1989.



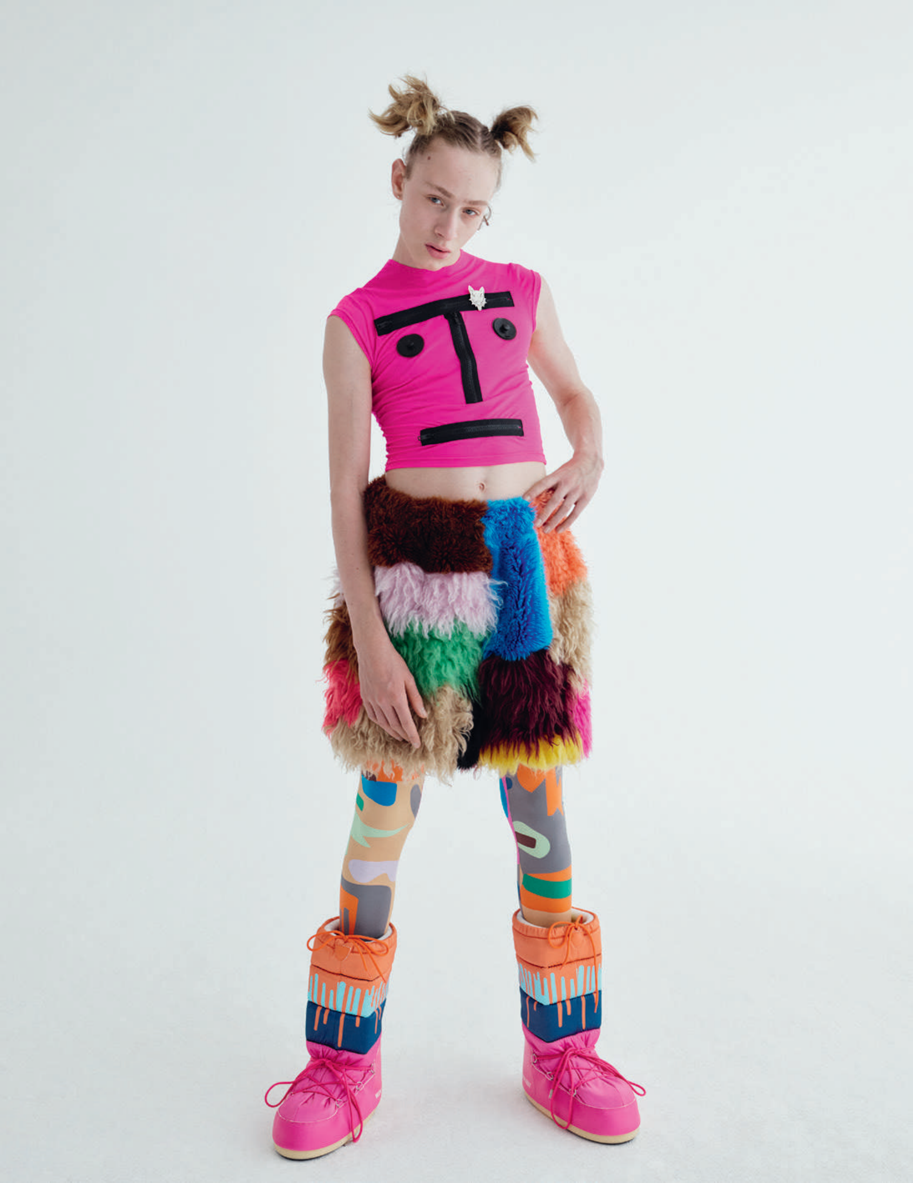
Bella wears polyester mini-dress with separate matching printed glove-sleeves, *A Fetish for Beauty*,
W.&L.T. by Walter Van Beirendonck, Spring/Summer 1998.



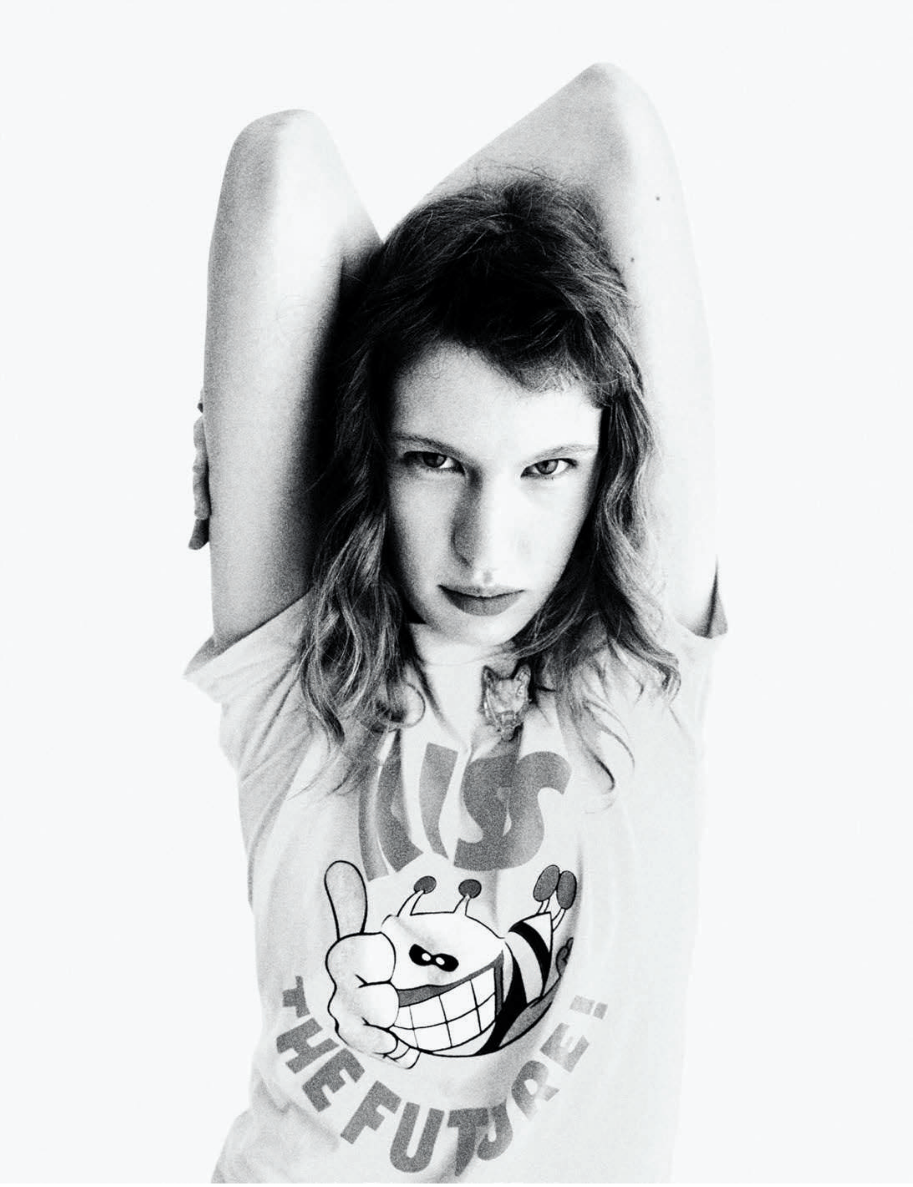
Oskar wears long-sleeved polyester sculptural T-shirt, *W.A.R.*,
Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 2020-2021.



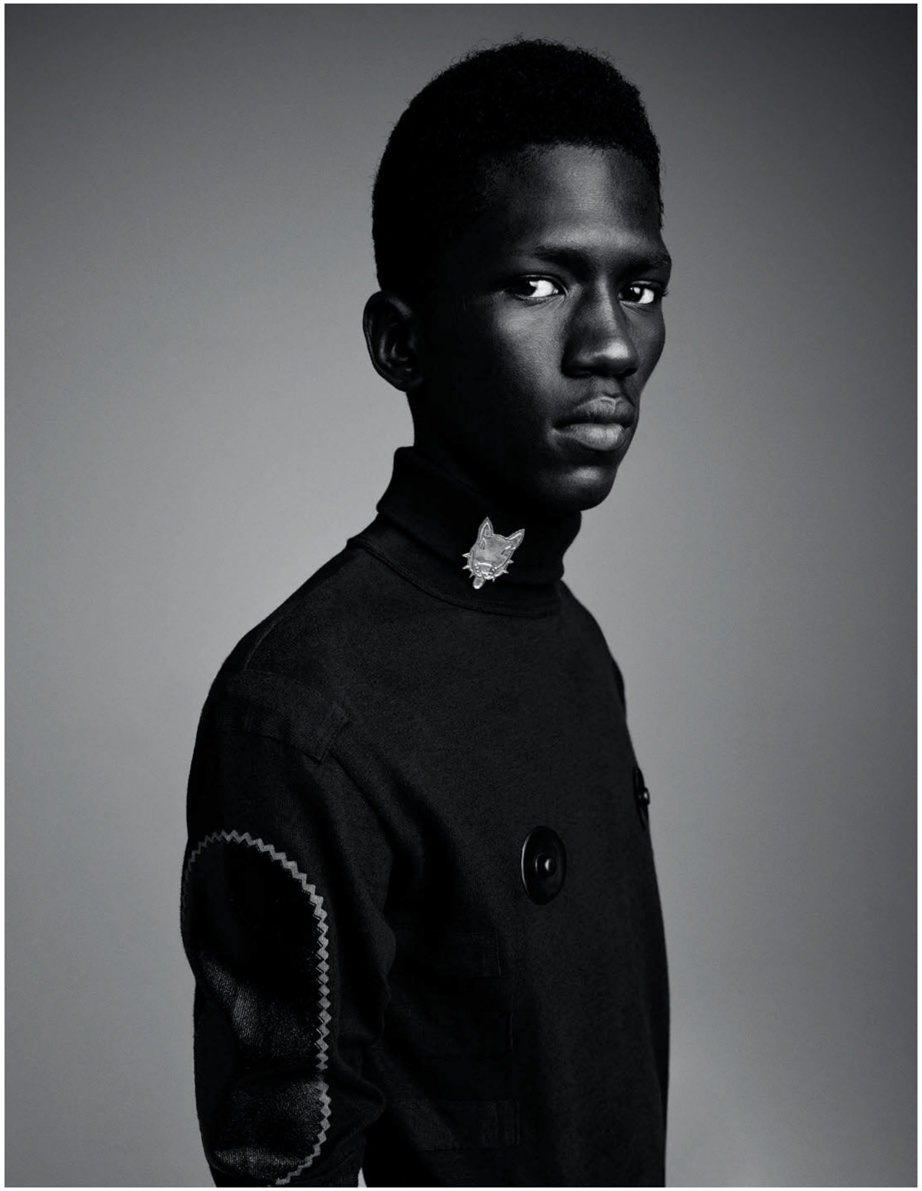
Lennert wears printed polyester cycling shirt and matching leggings, *Future Proof*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 2021-2022;
printed nylon and polyester boots, *Wow*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 2019-2020;
hand-knitted wool hat, *Wonderland*, W.&L.T. by Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 1996-1997;
and Sado brooch, *Shoot the Sun, Shoot the Moon, Be a Star*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 1988-1989.



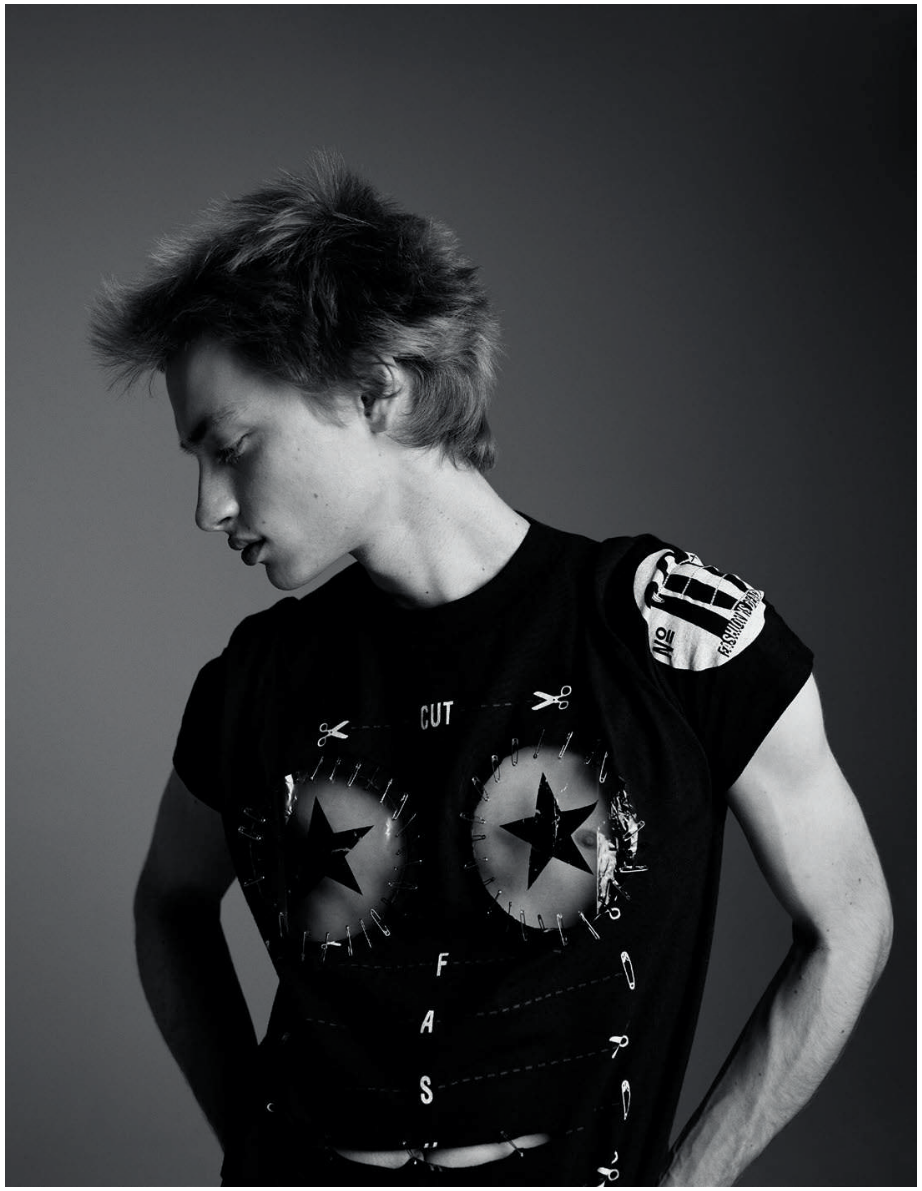
Oskar wears polyester T-shirt with appliquéd zips and printed 3-D rubber nipples, *Avatar*, W.&L.T. by Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 1997-1998;
ecological patchwork fur shorts and printed polyester and nylon boots, *Wow*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 2019/20;
and Sado brooch, *Shoot the Sun, Shoot the Moon, Be a Star*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 1988-1989.



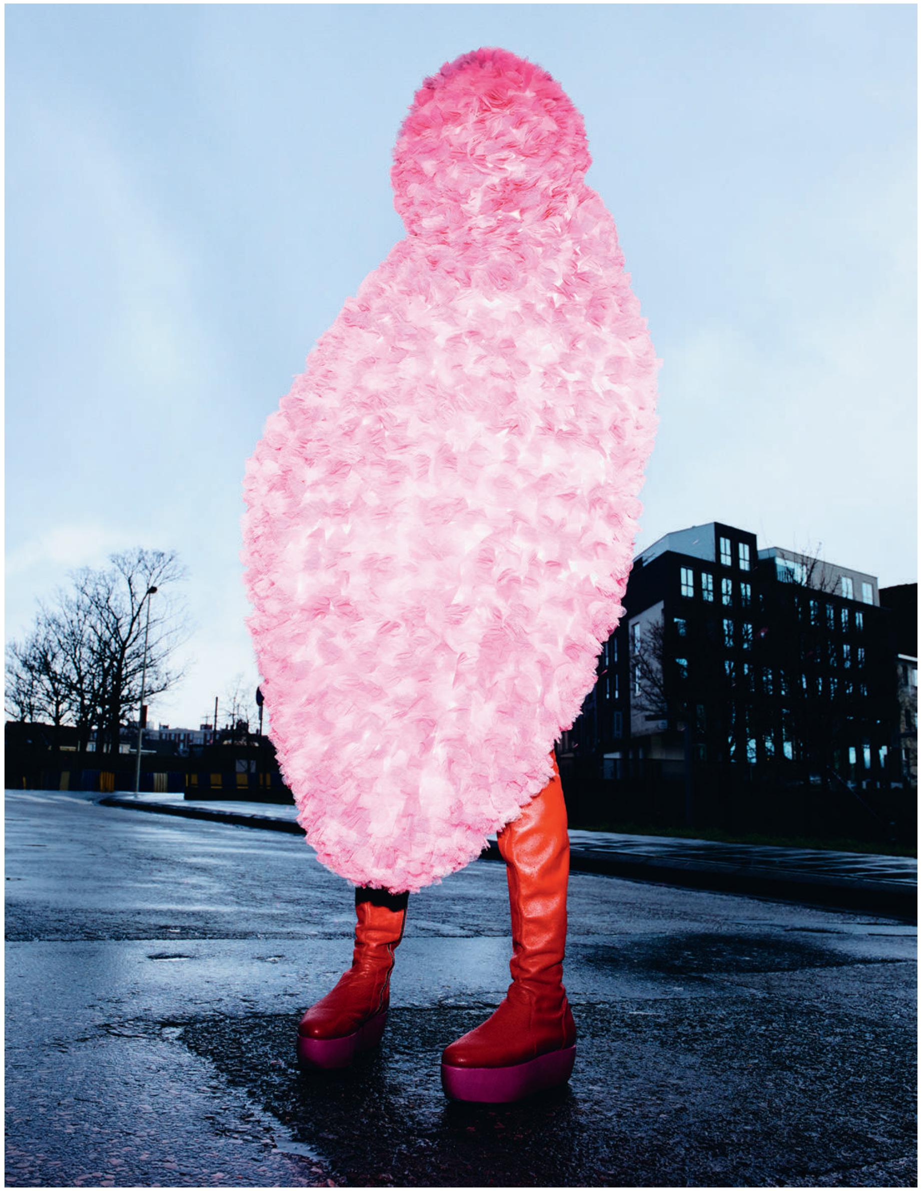
Mary wears printed cotton T-shirt, *Over the Rainbow*, W.&L.T. by Walter Van Beirendonck, Spring/Summer 1995; and Sado brooch, *Shoot the Sun, Shoot the Moon, Be a Star*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 1988-1989.



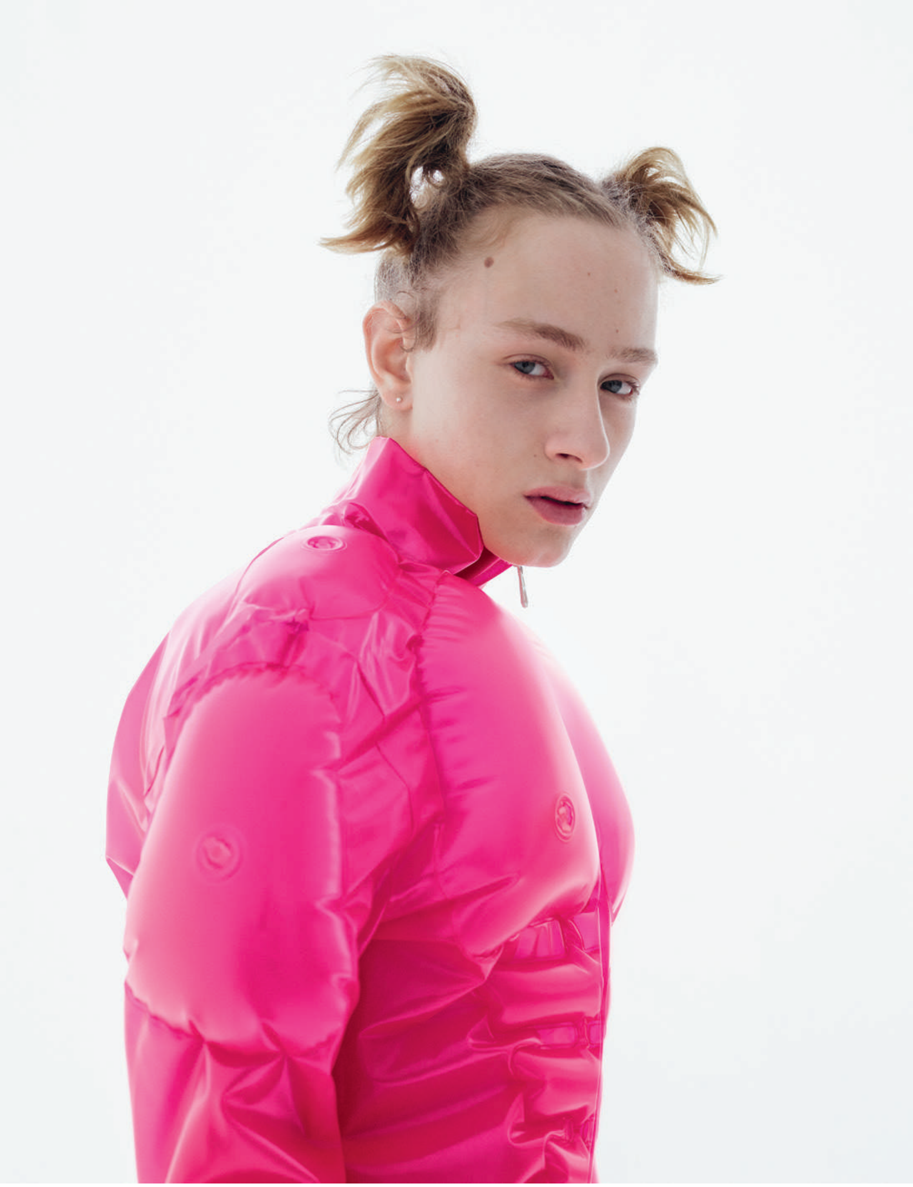
Moustapha wears cotton turtleneck with printed rubber patches and 3-D nipples, *The Big Bang*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 1990-1991; and Sado brooch, *Shoot the Sun, Shoot the Moon, Be a Star*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 1988-1989.



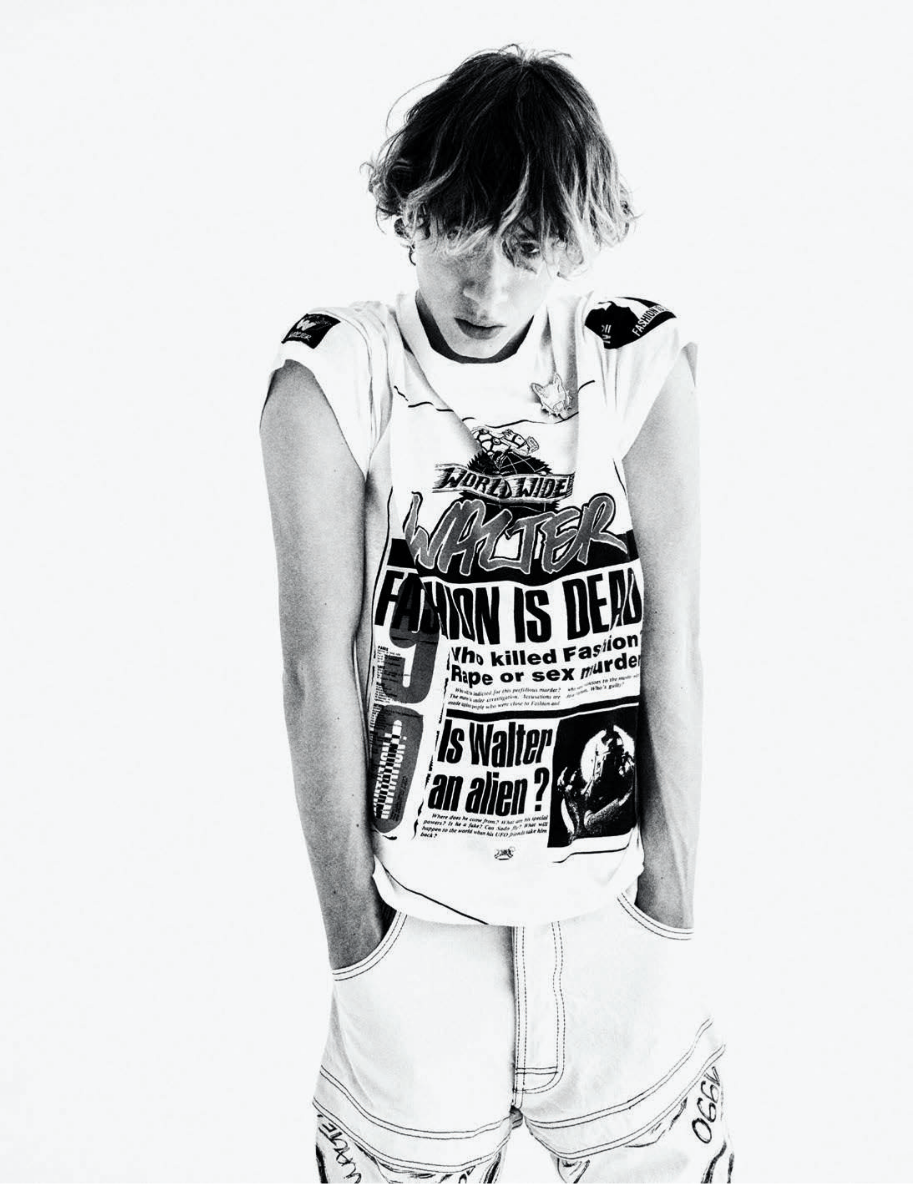
Lennert wears printed and cut cotton T-shirt with plastic inserts and safety pins, *Fashion Is Dead*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Spring/Summer 1990.



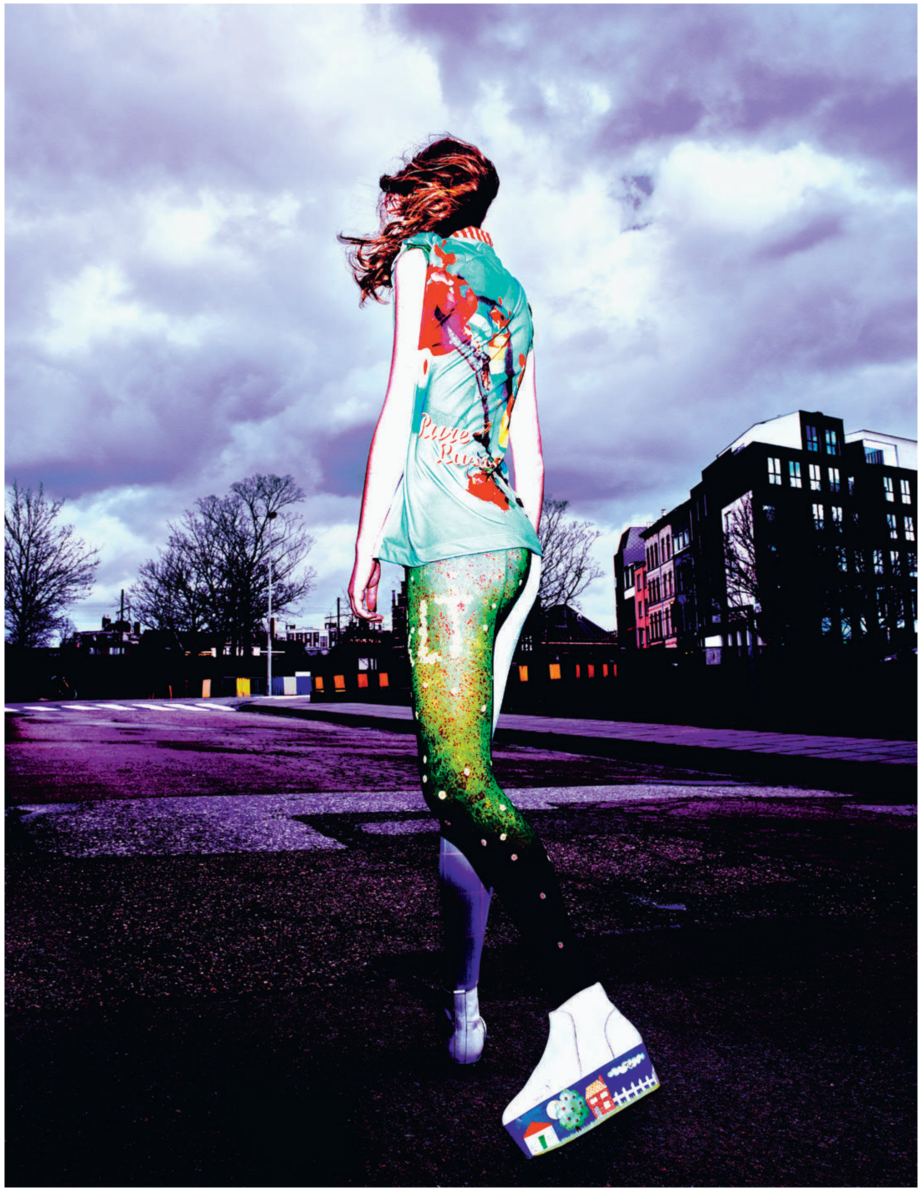
Oskar wears polyester ruffle-sculpture made in collaboration with Erwin Wurm, *Cloud N°9*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Spring/Summer 2012; and leather platform boots, *Hardbeat*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 1989-1990.



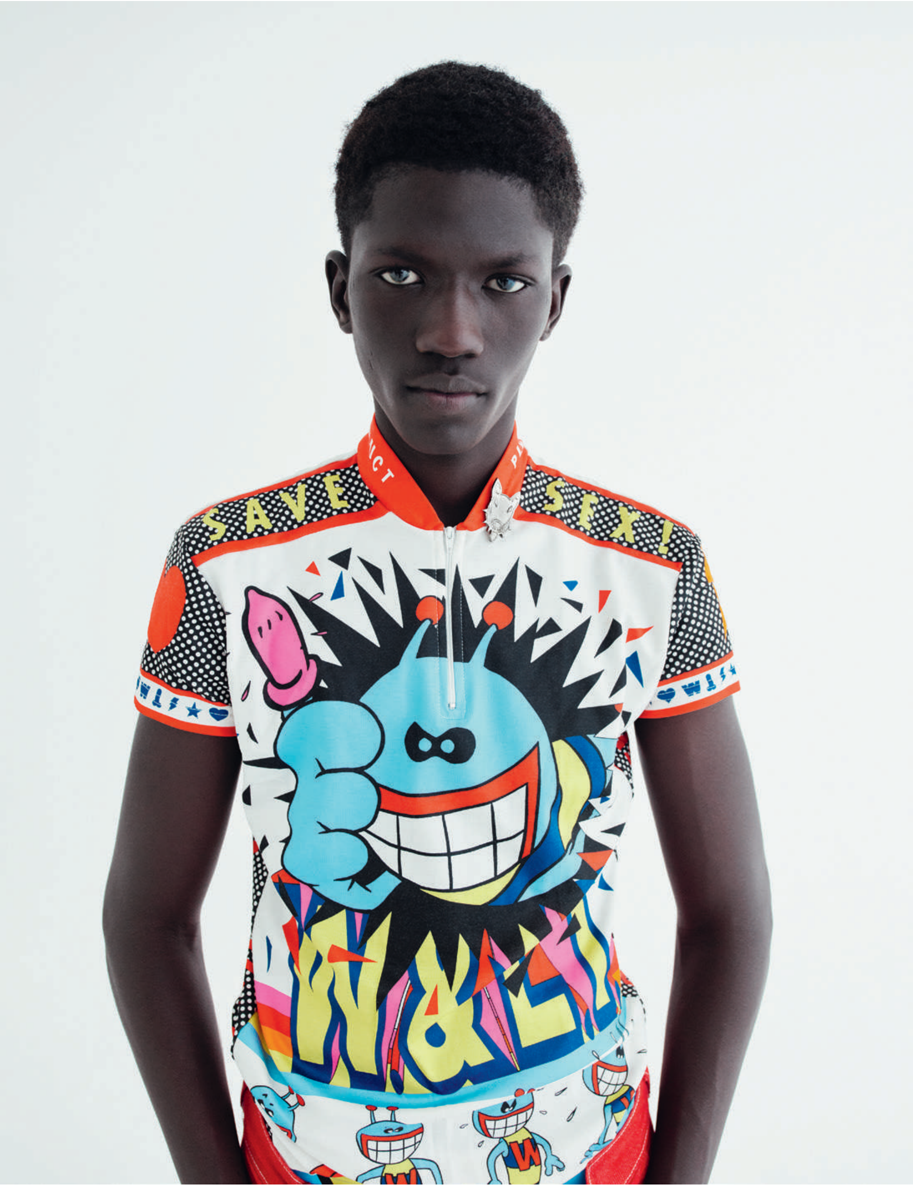
Oskar wears inflatable plastic muscle-jacket, *Killer/Astral/Travel/4D-Hi-D*, W.&L.T. by Walter Van Beirendonck, Spring/Summer 1996.


WORLD WIDE
WALTER
FASHION IS DEAD
Who killed Fashion
Rape or sex murder
Is Walter an alien ?

Oskar wears printed cotton T-shirt and printed jeans, *Fashion Is Dead*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Spring/Summer 1990; and Sado brooch, *Shoot the Sun, Shoot the Moon, Be a Star*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 1988-1989.

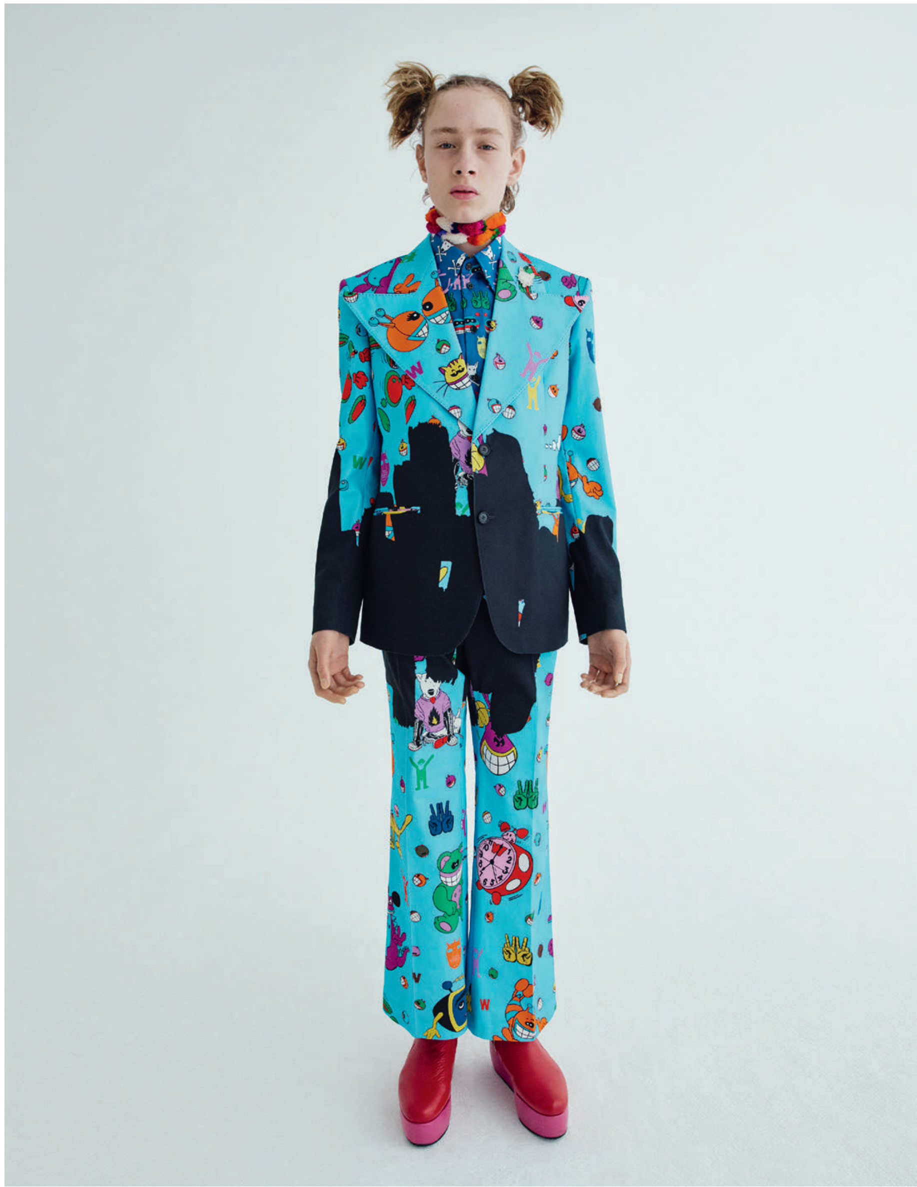


Mary wears printed polyester shirt and leggings, *Welcome Little Stranger*, W.&L.T. by Walter Van Beirendonck, Spring/Summer 1997; and hand-painted leather platform boots, *Avatar*, W.&L.T. by Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 1997-1998.



Moustapha wears printed polyester cycling shirt, W.&L.T. by Walter Van Beirendonck, *Killer/Astral/Travel/4D-Hi-D*, Spring/Summer 1996; cotton shorts, Walter Van Beirendonck, *King Kong Kooks*, Spring/Summer 1989; and Sado brooch, *Shoot the Sun, Shoot the Moon, Be a Star*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 1988-1989.

Bella Kim and Mary Duleu at Premium Models; Lennert De Lathauwer at Hakim Models; Mohamadou Diakhite at Success Models; Moustapha Sy at Rebel Management; Oskar Taifun Helmbold at Tomorrow Is Another Day.
Hair: Louis Ghewy at Management Artists. Make-up: Kathinka Gernant at Unspoken. Nails: Lotje Vleugels. Casting: DM Casting. Lighting technician: Romain Dubus. Digital operator: Henri Coutant.
Photography assistant: Samir Dari. Hair assistant: Eva Racollin. Make-up assistant: Romy Legger. Stylist assistants: Jasmien Van Loo, Elisa Mol, Erik Vanbergen, Niccolo Torelli. Producer to Willy Vanderperre: Lieze Rubbrecht.
Production: Mindbox. Producer: Isabelle Verreyke. Project manager: Lise Luyckx. On-set doctor: Michael Vergauwen. Thanks to Elisa Allenbach at TripleLutz Paris



Oskar wears printed cotton suit and shirt, *Future Proof*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 2021-2022;
original Indian-jewel necklace, *Wow*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 2019/20;
Sado brooch, *Shoot the Sun, Shoot the Moon, Be a Star*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 1988-1989;
and leather boots, *Hardbeat*, Walter Van Beirendonck, Autumn/Winter 1989/90.

Did Walter Van Beirendonck grow the Beard or did the Beard grow Walter?

There was nothing else like it in the well-groomed fashion world when he stopped shaving in 1988. Since then, the Beard has done a lot of PR for him, good and bad. Add a Mohawk and a *Mad Max* glower and it made him an intimidating road warrior. It was too ZZ Top for Berlin's top techno club: Walter was turned away at the door, even though everyone else in the queue was wearing his label W.&L.T. He bounced back with the rise of the bear. The Beard connected him with a more welcoming subculture. Now, in the Age of the Lumbersexual, big beards are everywhere. No longer threat or curio. I've been walking in the street with him in Antwerp when kids have called out 'Santa'. What's next? *Kawaii* Karl Marx?

'When I was 14 years old, I'd wear platform shoes and go to London to buy the most extreme things because I wanted to express myself through clothes.'

The Beard made him an avatar, like Donatella's hair and everything about Karl. Obviously, the Beard is attached to him. Yet Walter is not so attached to it that he wouldn't shave it off, with one caveat: he'd only do it 'to raise a lot of money for a good cause connected with nature and animals'.

Walter is the head of the fashion department at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, from where he graduated in 1980. He was one of the group of graduates known as the Antwerp Six who introduced a new Belgian fashion to the world. Among them was Dries Van Noten, Ann Demeulemeester, and Dirk Van Saene, Walter's partner since 1978. (Martin Margiela was an honorary member.) For decades, the couple has lived a bucolic existence in Zandhoven, the small village in the Belgian countryside where Walter's parents owned a car-repair garage, where he grew up, and where he has always dreamed his worlds awake.

One of his earliest collections was called *Let's Tell a Fairytale*. Like that other Walt, except this one's magic kingdom embraced environmental apocalypse, revolution, gender politics, sexual fetishism and body modification. Contrasts of fairy tale and dark fantasy, innocence and experience, enchantment and transgression have shaped his vision from the beginning. It's Disney versus Dionysus. Indeed, opposition is central to Walter's work: the utopia of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* versus the dystopia of *A Clockwork Orange*; *Snow White* versus *Pretty Woman*. He loves all these things.

'Just making clothes is not enough,' Walter told me long ago. He has often tried to add socially aware content, through the words and slogans he uses, or the names he gives collections. His most famous is probably *Kiss the Future*. After the year we've just had – and the year we're now having – the future isn't looking particularly kissable, and even though Walter has always had a thing for sci-fi and aliens and UFOs, embracing every futuristic cliché, he called his last collection *Future Proof – Stop Monsters Now*. A change of heart? Apparently not.

Tim Blanks: Were you being ironic when you called your last collection *Future Proof*?

Walter Van Beirendonck: No, it was inspired by the fact that for the moment I receive a lot of social-media interest from these kids who are 16, 17 ,18, who are discovering my 1990s collections and starting to buy them as vintage, which is a strange phenomenon. That's why I had the idea to reuse all my old characters and icons, with the thought that they will probably be popular again in another 20 or 30 years' time and attract a new, young audience then.

Do you think there is an anarchic quality in those clothes that appeals to kids?

It could be. I think they feel the energy in a different way to what you have with the anarchy of punk. But there is also a punk feeling if you put them back in their original context and compare them with other collections from that period. At the time, it was a statement to do those kinds of clothes, it was about being free and adventurous with new materials, techniques, shapes and forms. It was also a reaction to the fashion world. Kids can probably pick up on that.

Does it make you feel you've always been ahead of your time?

That is difficult to say. I did the right things at the wrong time. Just one example: I did so many multicoloured sneakers that I then developed for commercial collections, but I did them much too early and I couldn't sell them. Then a few years later, people were ready and they were buying them en masse. That happened several times in my career when I was so excited about something and the market didn't pick up on it and it was a disappointment for the people I was working with.

It feels to me like the pandemic may offer fashion a chance to establish a different rhythm, so it is not all about doing the New Thing. There will be chances to go back and reflect a little more, maybe bring old things back into the collection. That is what I wanted this conversation to be about really, the idea of reflection. What you've learned, what you've left behind.

I'm not someone who reflects a lot. Most of my decisions are spontaneous: I see something; I read something; I am attracted to it; I go deeper; I do some research; I get the subjects into my work – and the collection comes alive in a spontaneous way. The thinking process happens mainly in my collages, my sketches. That is the reflection I'm doing, during my working process.

You must see themes, though.

Yeah, yeah, it was very obvious in my exhibition[1] that I am attracted to certain themes. The fairy-tale theme is always there, and aliens and UFOs also come back a lot. The subject of gender comes back regularly, but I also try to discover new themes. It is very like searching for myself.

'The Wall was still up, and I crossed into East Berlin, wearing my big Montana coat and Plexiglas glasses; people looking at me like I was an alien.'

Fashion as therapy. And if you look at your body of work, your therapy has been particularly provocative. You've been exploring the intricacies of human sexuality in your collections for years.

I can imagine that it feels provocative for the audience, but for me it was a clear decision to push my boundaries, not only in private. I thought each time that it was the right moment to try to do something that was not convenient in a certain way. For me, it has never simply been about provocation, but pushing further my fashion and my ideas. Subconscious provocation, maybe, as a new way of approaching men's fashion.

Has the therapy worked?

Making fashion makes me happy and I am still enjoying it, so I think it works. I have a rather good balance, especially over the last 10 years. I have the feeling it is under control and I can do what I want, so that is a good feeling.

What do you think is the purpose of your work?

How to communicate through clothes. I don't know that everybody gets the right message, but at least I can show what I want to express through the collection. The communication has always been all about freedom. That is why I went through all these stages: to become a free man and to do exactly what I want. And that is why I had to stop with W.&L.T. in 2000 because I felt that I wasn't a free designer anymore. For me, the way I am working and how I am involved physically comes straight from my heart. So that is why it is so important to me to take my own decisions.

Independence can be a real battle in fashion. I imagine there were times when you felt like stopping.

Yeah, but I never did. Back in the 1990s, my goal was to make a project for young people, but I went through a very difficult period with different manufacturers and it all seemed impossible. Then I arrived at Mustang[2] in 1992 and they gave me the opportunity to do exactly what I wanted. After the first W.&L.T. show, they felt there was so much potential to attract attention to their label and to me that they gave me an unlimited budget. That was the whole thing with the huge shows and so much press attention. So I literally went from a period that was very dark to something that was very bright, and that is how my career has always gone, darkness to light, but always with a lot of energy to keep it going. So I never had the feeling that I had to stop.

The first W.&L.T. collection was Spring/Summer 1993, appropriately titled Wild and Lethal Trash! *Fast-forward to 25 January 1996: we were in Paris for Autumn/Winter 1996/97 and a collection called* Wonderland. *It would prove a watershed, its mens- and womenswear (children, too) becoming the grail for Walter's new acolytes. The presentation, which took place in a huge mushroom-shaped tent, had three distinct visual strands. First up were android-like Forty Kinky Kings modelled on mad King Ludwig of Bavaria, whose castles on the Rhine inspired the iconic centrepieces of Walt Disney's kingdoms. Ludwig's original versions were printed on sweats and T-shirts, along with two swans, who Walter said represented Dirk and him. Then came Forty Bears, cast from the bear community in London, who walked hand-in-hand with little W.&L.T.-ers, who wore mini-versions of the big boys' outfits. Last were Forty Colour Stars, spacy, body-modified, extra-terrestrial. All the contrasts of Walter's work were starkly on display: innocence and experience,* *enchantment and transgression, made more so by the fact that the collection incorporated motifs based on sex toys. 'I'm a catalyst,' he said. 'I'm interested in strange connotations.' The collection wasn't universally understood.* New York Times *fashion critic Amy Spindler wrote: 'Mr. van [sic] Beirendonck's bears all came out with little boys, and the suggestive (and sophomoric) program notes left little doubt about the designer's meaning. This show was a huge misstep.' The bear community wasn't too pleased either. Connotations breed miscommunication*.

Those W.&L.T. shows were like massive, cast-of-thousands manifestos. I think that is something that kids also respond to now, not just the clothes, but the whole circus that you created. That just doesn't exist any more.

It was rather crazy to create first all the clothes and then the ideas for the show in six months, but I had a good team and, of course, the money, so I had the opportunity to fantasize about how to put my ideas on the catwalk, to do incredible casting all over the world, to work with fantastic hair and make-up people, and with Stephen [Jones] for the hats. There was a lot of synergy between all these creative people and each time there was something – an idea or a space or a catwalk – that really worked very well. I enjoyed putting together those productions.

> **'For me, it's never simply been about provocation, but pushing further my fashion and my ideas, as a new way of approaching men's fashion.'**

You were a different person back then.

I don't think so; I don't feel so different, but I work on a different scale now. It was not about being young or about the energy of youth. I'd already been in fashion for more than 10 years; it was not the beginning of my career. No, I was rather organized coming up with the ideas, knowing how to make them, how to put them together on the catwalk. I was not working with producers. All the ideas came straight from me and my interests, and then we found solutions.

At that time you looked like something out of *Mad Max*; it was an extremely aggressive, confrontational look. If you weren't a different person, you played a different game in those days.

Yeah, it was a little bit like how a pop star would play the game, which I enjoyed because I always wanted to be a pop star, but could never sing. The way I approached the audience was really as a person combining all the elements that I have inside me. There was an aggressive part and then also something more humoristic, almost like a cartoon figure. Also, at that time a fashion designer was supposed to look very slick and then I arrived there with the beard and as a heavy man, not really how a normal fashion designer was conceived, I guess. Then I was wearing hardcore clothes with spikes and patches. I created my own persona, and then tried to make it a fantasy figure almost. It all came together very spontaneously; I was not thinking about what my next image would be. It was how I lived, and I was bringing things together. It was also how I liked to combine all these different things at that time. I enjoyed going to a leather bar one day and seeing an incredible exhibition the next day, mixed up with seeing a romantic movie like *Pretty Woman*. I am someone who enjoys all these different things – and *Pretty Woman* is my favourite movie.

There's no irony when you say that.

No, I am serious. We enjoy other movies, but just to tell you that I don't mind playing with these contrasts in my life, in my work, in everything.

Did you feel you had kindred spirits in fashion while you were doing W.&L.T.?

I was a little bit on my own then; I was rather disconnected from the rest of the fashion world. At that time, I was on the official calendar in Paris between Dior and Comme des Garçons, which felt strange but also incredible to be surrounded by people I had so much respect for. The person I always connected with as a designer was Rei Kawakubo. I don't know that we have anything in common, but I always appreciated her adventurous approach to fashion. At that time, I felt the most respect, the most interest for, and also the most common cultural feeling with artists. They came to my shows, which were featured a lot in art magazines, and they experienced them as performance. For them, it was a step beyond the fashion show. And people like Erwin Wurm and Sylvie Fleury would contact me for collaborations; Sylvie used the rubber video in one of her installations. Choreographers, dancers, ballet people were really interested in the W.&L.T. show. Those shows were so much about performing and showing the body in a different way. Also the casting I did, with very young people and old people, and the way I integrated them into a story. Like the show with all the birds of paradise dancing with the gas masks and the stilt-walkers, and the white people with the deformities.[3] It was a story and also kind of an event that was happening, and I think that was really appealing to people who were in performance.

Do you miss that? Can you condense that feeling into what you do now?

I mean, it was great to do and I enjoyed it, but it was also very demanding. Fittings alone took two days and a night. It was very intense. I don't think it suits the times any more, nor how I am now as a designer. I don't think I would like to do it that way. A small size fits better with this world.

> **'At that time a fashion designer was supposed to look very slick and then I arrived with the beard and as a heavy man, not really normal.'**

When did you first meet Rei Kawakubo?

Back in the early 1990s when we were still all together – I think Martin [Margiela] too – the Six went to Tokyo to do a show during fashion week, and we also went to some shows and visited Rei Kawakubo's atelier. We were all like 25 or 26. She wasn't there, but we could see the office where she worked. There was a bunch of flowers on the table and one of the people who was guiding us around said, 'You have to excuse me for this. Normally, there are no flowers, but this is because someone gave it to Rei for after the shows.' I'll never forget her making excuses for the flowers. We also did shows in different cities because we were part of a government-organized visit, and we were a little bit like the entertainment. For us, it was incredible to discover Japan, but we never had the right audience. It was always people who were invited by the government, never the fashion press. So we were completely anonymous in Japan, doing our shows with our first collections, the ones we made for the Golden Spindle prize.[4] Then in 2001, I went to Paris with the idea of combining Rei and Chanel in one exhibition. We had a very good conversation. Well, it was actually Adrian [Joffe, president of Comme des Garçons, and Kawakubo's husband and translator] who was talking up and down a little bit about the idea. Then it went very silent, and Rei said, 'No exhibition.' And I thought, 'Oh no, here we go, it's not going to happen.' And then she said, 'Show.' And in fact, it ended up that the Chanel part was the physical exhibition that you could visit, and the Comme des Garçons part was five shows that I did with her collection of that moment. I did the styling in a different way each time. The venue was always different, and so was the audience. Rei came to the first show we did in Antwerp – that was the one where all the Belgian designers were in the first row.[5] From then on, it was really nice proposing my new ways to style her collection every month. I would send Polaroids to Tokyo, she would look through them and say, 'OK, but you have to change this or that.' It was a very intense and respectful collaboration, and it was incredible to do, because of course, her presentations can be a little bit cold, but I could change the hair, the make-up, the shoes they were wearing. The models also.

Did an experience like that affect your own approach?

It gave me a lot of courage. To know her spirit and how difficult she is and how she trusted me to do whatever I wanted was so incredible to feel as a designer. And the way she works opened up my mind: you can do very experimental pieces, yet still do discreet and commercial products and sell garments. It is so difficult to be very adventurous and also be commercial, to combine that in a good way. It really works with Comme des Garçons.

Do you think you've been able to do that?

I've tried to keep that balance as much as possible. The image that you project to the outside world is also something that you have to keep in careful balance. When you get out of balance, you lose your credibility.

Do you wish you had been more successful?

Oh, that is easy to say! No, but I wish that I had had a bit more money, because even in my best times, it was always a struggle. Sometimes I am stubborn, and it was not easy to survive and go on and also to keep up the quality and say what I wanted to say and do. That is not an easy thing.

Walter could always measure his success against the designers who also graduated from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts between 1980 and 1981: Ann Demeulemeester, Dirk Bikkembergs, Dirk Van Saene, Dries Van Noten, Marina Yee, and Martin Margiela. With the rise of Milan, and the Japanese descent on Paris, it felt like the fashion world was opening up, and

Gert Bruloot, who helped promote the designers' post-graduate work in his Antwerp boutique Louis, thought it was time they journeyed further afield. So, in 1986, they were all packed into a van (minus Margiela who had left for Paris to work for Jean Paul Gaultier) and headed for the British Designer Show in London. They were an instant sensation and labelled the Antwerp Six by the local press because their names were such a mouthful. The Six (often referred to as 6+1 because Margiela is usually included) were together long enough as a group to have an international impact, until success, for some more than others, dispersed them. 'It was like a pop group splitting up,' Bruloot has said.

I always wondered about the dynamic of the Six. The thought of you all travelling around Japan together is lovely, like a troop of samurai. But what happened afterwards?
The period when we were intensely working together and going to the fairs was fantastic. It was a real feeling of friendship and synergy between everyone. We all had a clear input and we could really communicate, and that really helped a lot in getting to know the press and attracting buyers. Some of us were easier to accept, but the buyers were still coming and seeing everybody anyway. There was no competition because we all had a very clear direction, and the garments and the looks were very different. We'd work together during the day and then in the evening we'd have dinner together, go out dancing or to a party. Then everybody started to go their own way. The friendship is still there, but we don't see each other so much any more.

> **'I enjoyed going to a leather bar one day and seeing an exhibition the next; then mixing that up with watching a romantic movie like *Pretty Woman*.'**

I always got the feeling that you were the leader, because you were the most aggressive-looking one in the Claude Montana leathers.
No, no, no, I was always the stranger, but I did love those leather coats from Montana with the big shoulders. My mother also loved to go shopping and we would go and buy those pieces, which was really fantastic. I remember once we went to Berlin with the school for an exhibition. The Wall was still up, and I crossed into East Berlin with some friends. I was in my big Montana coat with my big Plexiglas glasses, and people looked at me like I was an alien.

Did you enjoy the sense of being an alien, of being a stranger in a strange land? UFOs and aliens show up in your work quite often.
I don't think I was expecting that reaction at that time, but I didn't mind. I never had the feeling I had to change my stuff to appeal to people, so I always did what I wanted. When I was 13 or 14 years old I was wearing platform shoes and going to London to buy the most extreme things because I really wanted to express myself through clothes.

In August 2020, Walter accused Virgil Abloh of copying a look for Louis Vuitton's Spring 2021 collection from his own collection for Autumn 2016. In the subsequent furore, some of those jumping to Abloh's defence turned the claim of plagiarism back on Walter for the many instances of inspiration he has drawn from elements of other cultures around the world, including the Masai, Bozo people of Mali, and groups in Papua New Guinea and Afghanistan.

You say you're stubborn, so I imagine that means you get frustrated sometimes. Do you think that has opened you up to being misunderstood? I mean, the whole issue of cultural appropriation became such a big one for you.
It is frustrating when you do things directly from your heart. Being fascinated by other cultures and suddenly you are not really allowed to look at them any more – yes, that feels very frustrating. For me, research is more to trigger my fantasy to create something. Maybe it starts from a certain inspiration, but in the end I don't think you feel it so obviously, or even when you do feel it, I think you know it's done with a lot of respect. There is this *StyleZeitgeist* podcast about political correctness in fashion, which they did two weeks after the incident, with people accusing me of not doing things correctly, and they really talk about this and how it has rewired fashion.[6] If you look back at Jean Paul Gaultier's collections, for example, there are so many topics that he would not be able to do any more. So the feeling that you are not able to express yourself freely any more and touch certain subjects is frustrating. I always did it with a lot of respect; I never had the impression that I was misusing other cultures or even using them in a very literal way.

I know that when people were going after you, there was also criticism of Belgium's colonial record.[7] It's appalling, as is the UK's or France's. Any country that had an empire has blood on its hands; it's simple. But how do you work around an issue like that in fashion? People like to say, 'You need to do some learning.' What did you learn?
At that time, I went from victim to accused in a few days. I was in the eye of the storm and suddenly I was blamed for doing so many things wrong. That was very much a frustrating feeling, because I felt that I was always very open-minded about my interests. I have always talked about my interests in tribes and rituals, in Papua New Guinea, for example, so for me it was very natural in the way I was working and thinking. In the changing world now, we cannot do things in the same way as before. How to deal with these things is a challenge. I know Belgium's terrible colonial record, but I found it a bit extreme to cast me in that very bad light. I also wondered why people didn't get in contact with me directly and talk it over instead of finger-pointing on social media, saying I did this or that. Then two days afterwards, it was all over. That is the thing with social media: it is like a storm and then it is gone. But after something like that, you learn to be more sensitive. It's important. It's not that I was ignorant or never opened a book. I was not in that situation; I was always the one promoting inclusivity and diversity. Now there are a lot of designers who are afraid to make a mistake, though, because they don't want to do bad things to other people, even though that is never their intention. It creates a strange tension in the fashion world.

> **'I literally went from a period that was very dark to something that was very bright, and that is how my career has always gone – from darkness to light.'**

There are so many wrongs that need righting, so many hundreds of years of injustice that need addressing, as well as the fashion industry's own endemic shortcomings. The environment has changed radically. You have a responsibility to your environment, to your customers, to your students as well.
My responsibility to other people was always there, as a teacher and as a fashion designer – I've always felt it. That is why I've always made so many statements in my collections. From the beginning, I was concerned about the planet, about animals, and how we were evolving. With the AIDS epidemic, for example, I felt very strongly about the safe-sex message in my collection. A sense of responsibility has long been a normal thing for me and over the years it has become even bigger. Now I feel even more responsible to think certain things over before really doing them.

You talked about frustration. As you get older, do you ever feel despair, or do you feel more resigned to the way the world is?
I don't feel despair, no. These last years, I've felt rather peaceful in one way or another. I have found a balance. I do things I like and enjoy. I am very happy with my private situation, being together with Dirk, living in this house. Of course, I'm getting older and I am hoping that I can still do a lot of things in the future, but your time gets shorter, and that is the feeling that makes things a bit scary.

Do you like getting older?
No, no!

Do you go back and look at your old things and wonder how you did them? Can you relate to your younger self?
I have huge archives because I keep almost everything. When we did the shoot for *System* with Olivier [Rizzo], everything was perfectly displayed in the studio like a shop or an exhibition, and it felt very natural to see all these things come together. I am sometimes surprised that I did a particular piece at a particular time, because it was a fight and also a bit crazy to do things like that in the 1990s. Like the blow-up jacket.[8] I mean, how did I come up with the idea of a blow-up jacket? And then present it to the 60 agents at the time, who were asking, 'Why do we need a blow-up jacket to show off our muscles?' Or I had to convince them to do a fluo colour in the collection because they said, 'No way, everything is really dark now and you'll never sell fluo yellow.' So I was always fighting to get my ideas into the collection. Now, when I see those pieces and I know the context I was working in, I think I was brave. I don't have to be brave any more because I am not working with so many people now. I'm really happy I did it though. It's not necessarily that I did it better; I just enjoy the energy that I was putting into collections at that time.

I think your vocabulary changes as you get older and that can be a good thing in certain ways, but you do also lose things. What don't you like about getting older?
It is the physical side. I don't feel it in my head, but when I look in the mirror I see that I am not the same as 10 years

ago. Also, there's the feeling of not having the possibility of going on and on and on, because physically you can't. In the 1990s and 2000s I went on and on and on and that was an incredible feeling. I was sometimes in three different countries in a week, seeing and visiting things, talking with people, and then working on top of all that and coming up with these incredible shows and results. And then travelling the world with U2 and being backstage. That kind of feeling is gone a little bit, because it is a typical feeling you have around your forties.

In 1997, Bono invited Walter to Dublin to talk about designing the costumes for U2's upcoming tour. 'I was so surprised because I was not even a fan of his music,' he remembers. 'I love electronic music, not rock.' It was a gauge of W.&L.T.'s impact. The invitation was accepted and Walter created signature looks for the whole band, including Bono's notorious muscle T-shirt. The PopMart *tour crossed the world from April 1997 until March 1998, its 93 shows grossing nearly $174 million. Fans were apparently confused by the band's willingness to mock its serious image. Irony died! Yet a decade later, Bono said he considered the tour to be U2's finest.*

'I remember you asked me, 'What is your safe word?', and I didn't get what you were talking about. Then afterwards I was, like, 'How stupid is that?!''

You said you wanted to be a pop star. When you were travelling with U2, did you think, 'This is my world'?
It was fascinating. The premiere in Las Vegas was incredible because I stayed together with Dirk backstage at the rehearsals for literally four weeks. We were intensely together with the whole band, really working on the garments and doing alterations because there was so much stress and a lot of things had to be changed at the last minute. One day, Bono was an M, and the next day he was an S, and the day after that an L; he was changing all the time. But it was really nice to be in the middle of that very intense moment of putting together such a huge show. They were used to wearing very easy rock'n'roll looks, and suddenly they were wearing costumes, but they enjoyed working with the designer to combine that with the *PopMart* stage set and videos.

Are you still in touch?
We don't see each other regularly, but the band and Bono are very respectful and loyal people.

You mentioned fairy tales and there's always that element in your work, of exploring myths and codes. I remember we chatted a while back, and you had got into BDSM. It was this new world you were exploring, and you were excited by the idea of there always being a transgression, another world for you to explore. I guess that does follow on from talking about appropriation.
I remember you asked me, 'What is your safe word?', and I didn't get what you were talking about and then afterwards I was, like, 'How stupid is that?!' You know that I am attracted to new worlds, but it doesn't mean I am involved in these things. At that time I was really exploring this new world because there was a person who was actively doing it and then, of course, you start to be fascinated. That's what it is really, a fascination more than anything. That is the main thing.

But you do manage to bring the fascination into the work. If you care to look for it, you can see it. It is like a fairy tale. You have the candy colours, but the heart is dark. That balance is a very strong thing in your work.
I discovered that feeling while getting to know Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, who are really my favourite artists.[9] When I visited Paul McCarthy in LA, it was sensational to see how he was expressing himself in a way that was uniting so many different universes and inspirations. It's what triggered me to work that way, to do the candy colours and then also make the hard and rough statements.

And done all the time with beautiful tailoring, like the perfect craft with the chaos.
I am very proud of the tailoring. Right after school, I worked for almost 10 years for Bartsons. It was a Belgian company you could compare a bit to Burberry. Martin [Margiela] worked for them; Ann [*Demeulemeester*] worked for them, too. For a long time, I was designing traditional trench coats and very constricted and tailored pieces, and we would do that in-house with the technical people who were making the patterns. That was a huge learning experience for us all. Next to the ideas that we bring to the collections, our strength is definitely that we are able to tailor them ourselves. We are able to translate even weird ideas into tailoring – and if they are very well executed, they perform much better. I think one of the strengths of the Six was that we all had rather traditional backgrounds where we were really pushed to work in a very dedicated way.

Do you think that by being able to craft something so well you can lure people in, and then hit them with the chaos and the transgression?
That is a little bit my working system. You attract them and once they get in, they're surprised by the world they are entering. That is what I really enjoy, to play that kind of game with the press, with the audience, with the buyers. It's like a dance, a little bit attracting them in and then pushing back.

Would you rather seduce people or disturb them?
Seduce and disturb them at the same time.

'In certain worlds, you can put on a mask and you can do anything or be anybody you want behind it. It gives you perfect freedom, which I find appealing.'

Speaking of disturbing, you use masks a lot; I find them scary. In a movie, when someone removes their mask, you know they're going to kill you, because that means they don't care if you can identify them. Tell me about your use of masks.
Of course, the idea that you can be anybody you want behind the mask is very appealing; it gives you perfect freedom. In certain worlds, you can put on a mask and you can do anything you want. That is a good feeling for me. The way I am using masks is really to create a kind of different identity, and also again the same dance I am doing with attracting and pushing back. You create an atmosphere that feels a bit uncomfortable on the catwalk and that tension can drastically change the feeling of the viewer. I find that very interesting. You are starting to use your imagination because you see something that is disturbing, and that is putting you on the back foot.

Do you think your own persona is almost like a mask? Or an avatar? Like Jean Paul Gaultier or Donatella Versace or Karl Lagerfeld? Ask people to describe Walter Van Beirendonck, what are they going to say? Big beard!
The look all happened over the years in a very spontaneous way for me. It is not that I am taking it off or putting it on; it is always there. If there is a mask, it has grown together with me and become me, and I am wearing it permanently. And then we have to think, is there someone behind it, another person? But I don't think it goes that far.

Well, we did say that fashion was therapy. That would be an extremely heavy exercise. Who is the man behind the mask? It makes me wonder if there is one collection that means more to you than the others.
The collections that are more important are about the message I was bringing or about the reactions I got. *Sex Clown* [Spring/Summer 2008] was very important. I showed it in the Bataclan in Paris, because it was a static presentation. There were only 15 looks that were presented on models standing on small blocks in a big half circle that made them like sculptures. Together with very loud techno music, it was a very intense atmosphere. The collection before that had been *Stop Terrorising Our World*, and was the one where I was really trying to get myself back on the rails under my own name in Paris – without much success. The press didn't react, the buyers didn't buy, which was frustrating and disappointing. I wasn't getting the attention I used to have before, and I just said, 'Fuck it all, I'm going to do what I want. I'm not going to be commercial; I'm just going to do a collection that stands for everything I stand for.' *Sex Clown* was very extreme with the shapes and the forms and the hats with Stephen [Jones], with an African inspiration. It came together as a very strong statement and everyone was reacting and talking about it, and it attracted buyers to the showroom. That collection was a statement of doing what I wanted. It was a statement of freedom that really had results, and I am very proud that I did it that way. If I had continued in a way that was aiming to please people, I never would have got to where I am now. Sometimes in fashion you have to please people, but with that one I didn't want to please anyone.

It's interesting that you can take a long view on your work, talk about people looking at your clothes in 2050, because fashion never takes the long view. It's always looking at the next season. Maybe the pandemic will change that, but I've often imagined how all this will look to an audience in 50 or 100 years. I think people will look at *Sex Clown* as a performance and they will be amazed by it. They won't understand why it happened then, but they will be triggered by it.

It was also a small collection and there aren't many photographs. Also, most of the pieces were split over four museums, so they are not available for shoots.

Do you feel inclined to revisit it?
No, I don't think so. It was such a particular energy, and the way it was presented… No, it was a bit like a holy moment for me, and it should keep that feeling.

It's been 40 years since Walter graduated from fashion college. I've been thinking about all the designers who are hitting that landmark: Dries, Michael Kors, Marc Jacobs. It's not like you go into fashion thinking, 'This is what I'm going to be doing in my sixties.' Music's the same. Mick Jagger's 77, for heaven's sake, but life's what happens when you're busy making other plans, as Jagger's late contemporary John Lennon so sagely observed. So what stays? There's something about the Van Beirendonck signature that suggests it will linger. It has enough chaos that it offers no easy answers, enough colour that it appeals to a sense of play. It's atavistic and sci-fi at the same time. There's a ritualistic, pagan spirit. It's supremely cult – and occult. Like the 'Chant of the Ever Circling Skeletal Family' (because Walter needs a Bowie reference and I do, too).

'I receive lots of social-media interest from kids who are 16, 17, 18, who are discovering my 1990s collections and starting to buy them as vintage.'

What do you think history will make of you?
I don't know, but when I look at Rudi Gernreich, for example, the kind of people I admire so much because they were working so hard on their ideas and they had so little recognition during their lifetimes – but then they leave such an incredible legacy… I hope that I will also leave a legacy that will be inspiring for future generations.

Do you think of all your students from the Royal Academy over the years as a living legacy in a way? There are all these children of W.&L.T. in the world, like Craig Green and Bernhard Willhelm.
Well, they weren't exactly students, but I think what I learned is that you can do a lot, almost the impossible, with very little. You don't need a lot of infrastructure and money to do incredible things. Alex Wolfe is another one who is starting to become quite big now; he was one of my interns. For all these people to see me work – and, first of all, I do all the work myself; I am really there A to Z in the whole collection – and to see the possibilities even with such a small team, how it's still possible to achieve rather impressive results… I think that impressed these designers, and gave them a lot of energy and dynamism to go ahead. But legacy is such a difficult thing to talk about.

It's something that other people talk about on your behalf, but I mean, when you project forward to 2050, when there will no longer be the acolytes in the here and now, there will still be your sort of enduring philosophy – freedom, tolerance, challenge. Think about sci-fi. Someone should write a book where W.&L.T. becomes a new religion of the future. Wouldn't that be fabulous?
The nice thing is that I am thinking that way, about 2050. During an archive shoot, like the one for this magazine, with all those pieces from 30 years ago until now, they still feel that they belong to the same universe and the same designer. And that makes me very happy and proud that I have a very recognizable signature that you can read from a distance. That is also a bit of a legacy – that you are recognizable and that your work is complete.

Are you a hopeless romantic?
Yes. I am very romantic. I love to listen to romantic music – I just bought the new one from Lana Del Rey – and I love to fall in love.

Who or what do you fall in love with?
People that I am attracted to and who I feel are interesting. It doesn't happen every week, but maybe every 10 years there is somebody I think is more interesting than the other people I am meeting. So that is a feeling of becoming friends or talking about things and I enjoy that.

What are you going to do with the rest of the day?
Now we are going to have lunch, downstairs; I don't know what it is, of course. Then we'll go for a walk, at least 7,000 steps, and then after the walk we will go to buy food in an organic farm that sells fruit and vegetables. And then I will come back and continue with my fabrics. At the moment I am ordering the fabrics for the new summer collection.

Walter and Dirk enjoyed a goat's cheese quiche for lunch.

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1. *Dream the World Awake*, a retrospective of Van Beirendonck's first 30 years in fashion, was held at the Mode Museum Antwerp from 14 September 2011 to 19 February 2012. It featured a wide selection of designs from throughout his career, as well as archive materials revealing his inspirations and a large-scale video project shot by Nick Knight and styled by Simon Foxton.

2. Mustang is a German jeans and clothing brand, founded in 1932 by seamstress Luise Hermann as a way to support her financially struggling husband. In 1948, her son-in-law, Albert Sefranek, swapped six bottles of schnapps for six pairs of jeans with some GIs and used them as the basis for what the company claims were the first European jeans. Mustang supported Walter Van Beirendonck's label W.&L.T. from 1992 until 1999.

3. For *Fetish for Beauty* (Autumn/Winter 1998), Van Beirendonck hired 70 dancers who wore the collection along with green rubber sleeves and white gas masks. Once onstage, they proceeded to dance a mix of tango, samba, rumba and cha-cha.

4. The Golden Spindle was a prize created by the Belgian government in 1982. Anne Demeulemeester won the inaugural award; Dirk Van Saene the second. The prize should not be confused with the Golden Spindle National Award, organized since 2003 by the Ministry of Industry and Trade of Russia Program for the Development of Competitiveness of Textile and Light Industry.

5. *Mode 2001 Landed-Geland* was a five-month celebration of (Flemish) fashion held in Antwerp from May to October 2001. Co-created by Van Beirendonck and Linda Loppa of the Flanders Fashion Institute, it included a Van Beirendonck-curated show called *Mutilate?* about body distortions and alterations; one called *Emotions* on the top floor of the city's Police Tower; and *Two Women*, the exhibition organized by Van Beirendonck that twinned Coco Chanel and Rei Kawakubo.

6. The episode, which was *StyleZeitgeist*'s debut podcast, was released on 9 September 2020 and entitled *Political Correctness and Fashion with Angelo Flaccavento.*

7. Belgium's colonial empire, which covered the majority of what is today the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was originally established in the late 1870s as the Congo Free State. Essentially a private holding company, it was controlled and run by Belgian king Leopold II. By the 1890s, the regime's agents were notorious for their use of kidnapping, torture, mutilation – particularly, the removal of hands with machetes – and summary execution to terrorize the population, which was forced to work gathering rubber. Meanwhile Leopold's private army, the Force Publique, brutally put down any rebellions by burning villages and massacring local populations. By the time the Belgian state took control of Congo Free State and renamed it the Belgian Congo in 1908, the population is estimated to have dropped from 20 million to 8 million. Congo finally became an independent country on 30 June 1960.

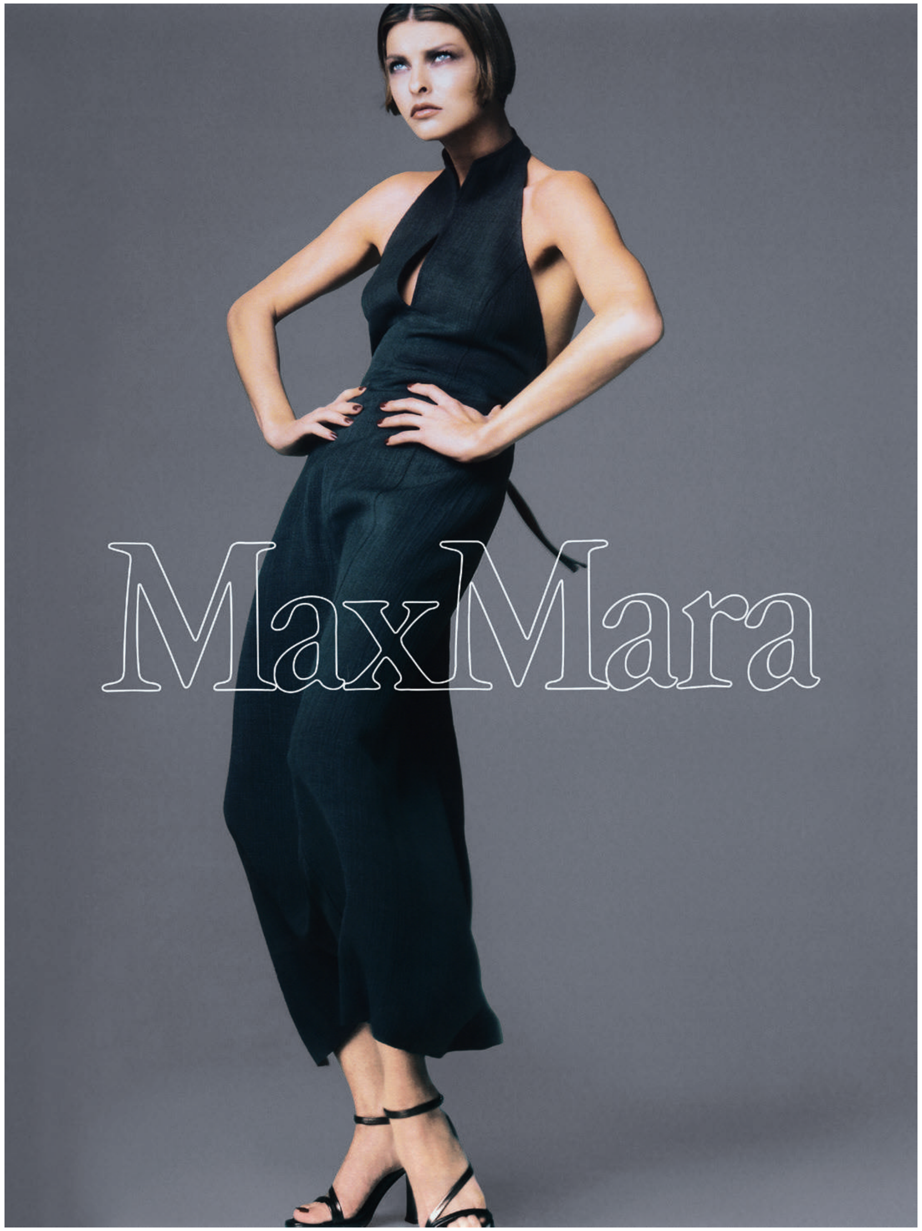
8. The transparent PVC He-Man jacket with its inflatable torso was part of the Spring/Summer 1996 *Killer/Astral Travel/4D-Hi-D* W.&L.T. collection.

9. Before his suicide aged 57 in 2012, Mike Kelley worked in many genres, including performance and video art, installations and painting. Holland Cotter in the *New York Times* wrote that all his work was essentially 'a single conceptual project' based on themes such as 'social class, popular culture, black humor' and a rarely acknowledged 'moral sense'. American artist Paul McCarthy has worked in different media, but is now best known for his oversized absurdist sculptures, such as a giant snail (*Sweet Brown Snail*) and *Santa Claus* (2001, in which Father Christmas brandishes a sex toy). In 2014, *Tree*, an inflatable 24-metre-high, tree-shaped butt plug, was displayed on Place Vendôme in Paris. It survived two days before being holed.

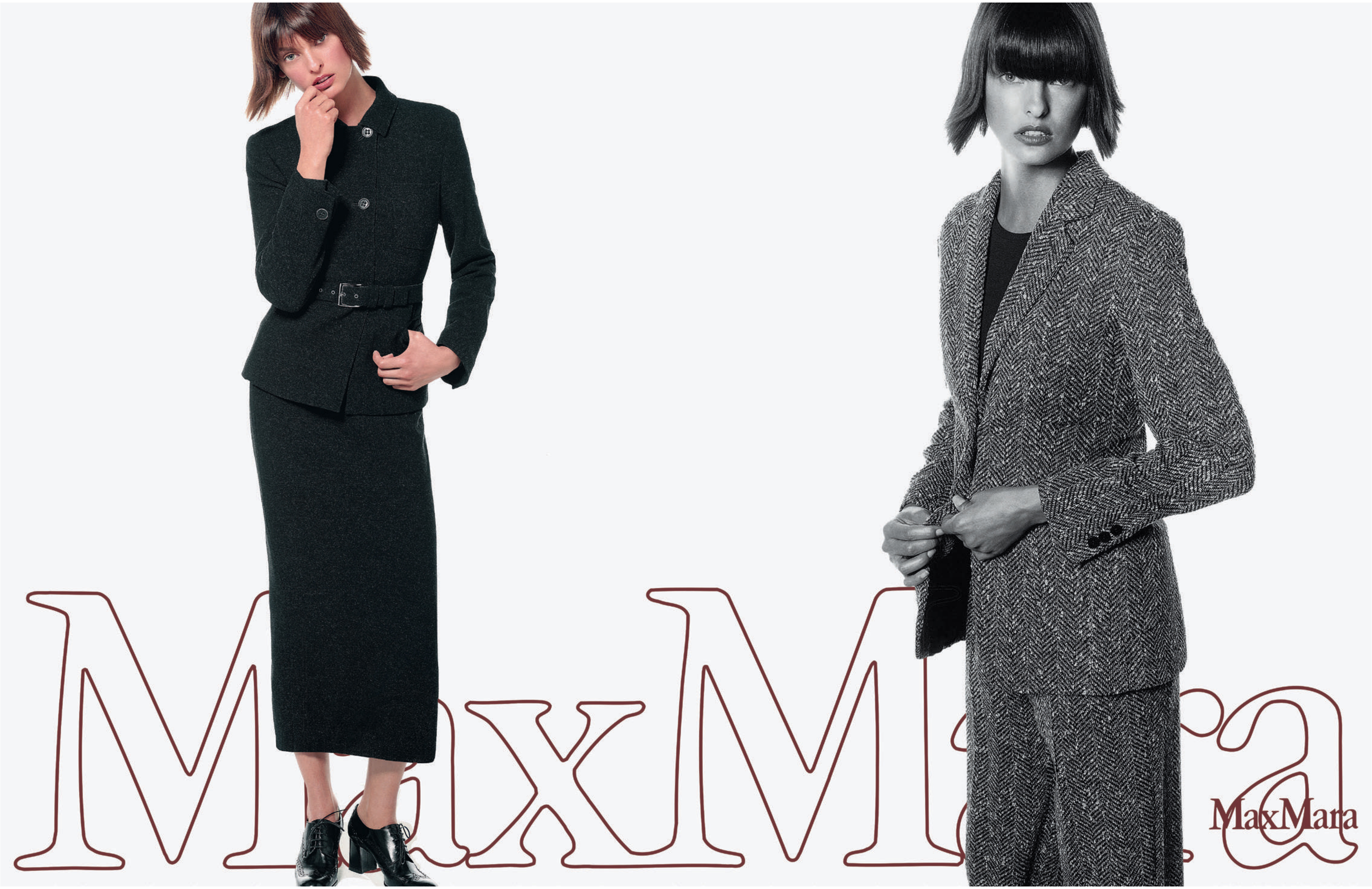
‘Steven is a little bit like Max Mara – he’s timeless.’

Why Max Mara’s ongoing Steven Meisel campaigns epitomise the Italian brand’s mantra of ‘evolution not revolution’.

Interview by Thomas Lenthal



Linda Evangelista, Spring/Summer 1997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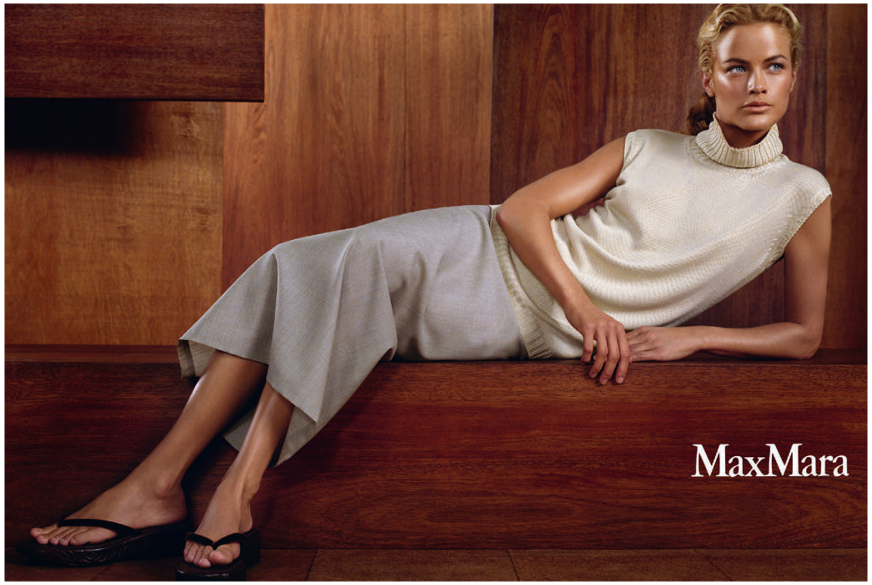
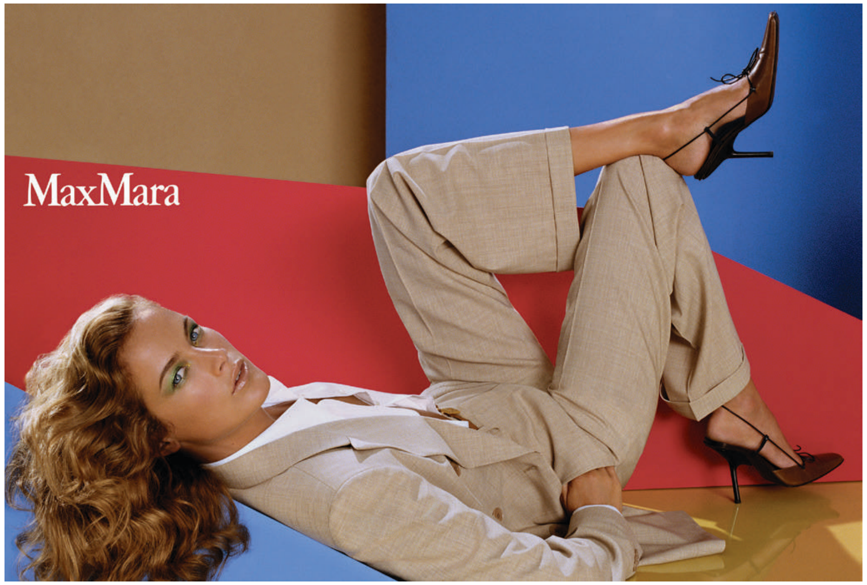
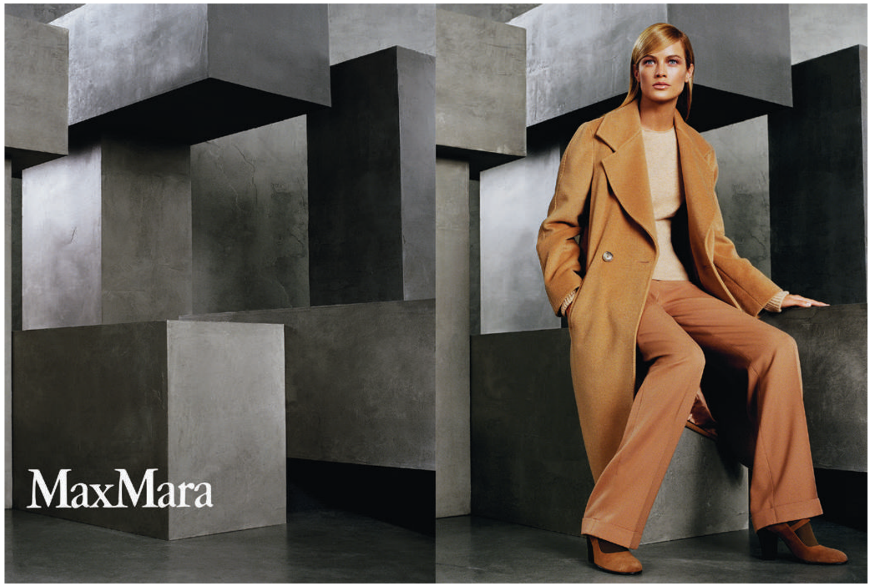
Linda Evangelista, Autumn/Winter 1997-1998



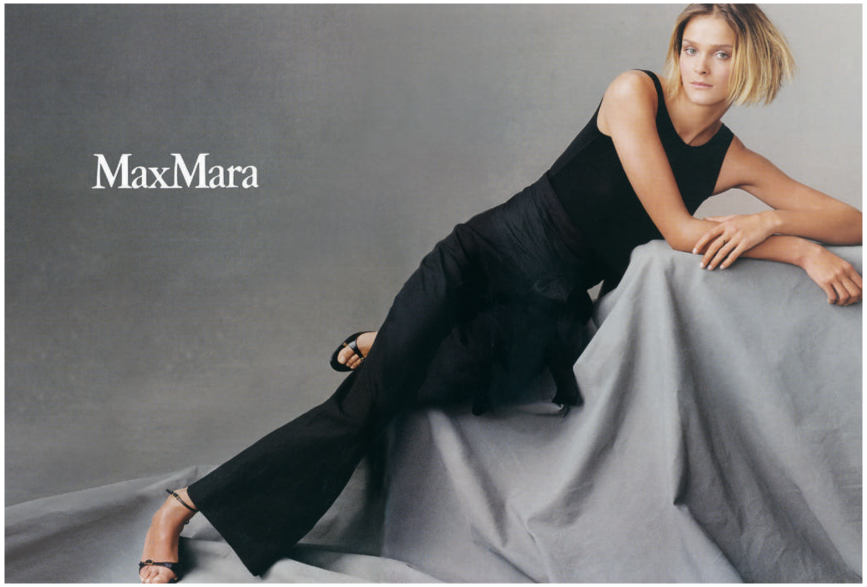
Carolyn Murphy, Spring/Summer 1999



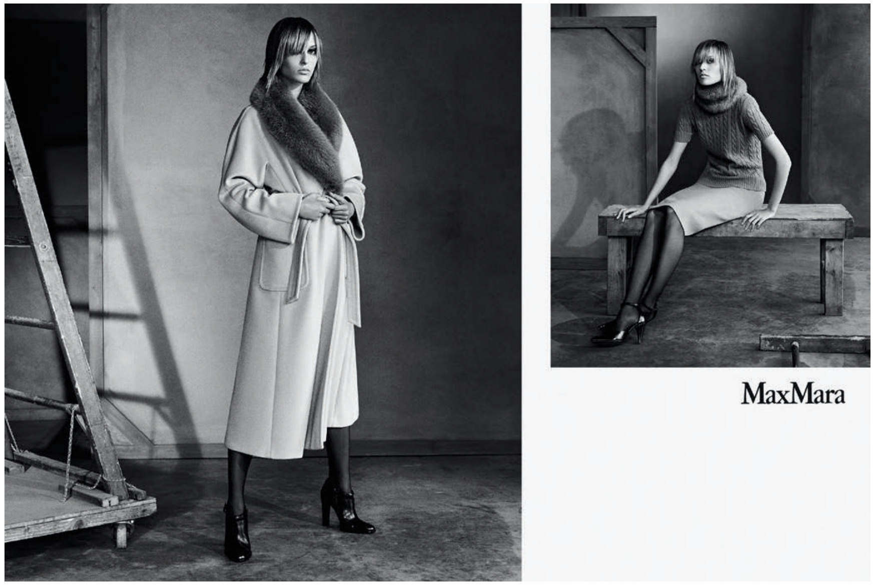
Carolyn Murphy, Spring/Summer 2000



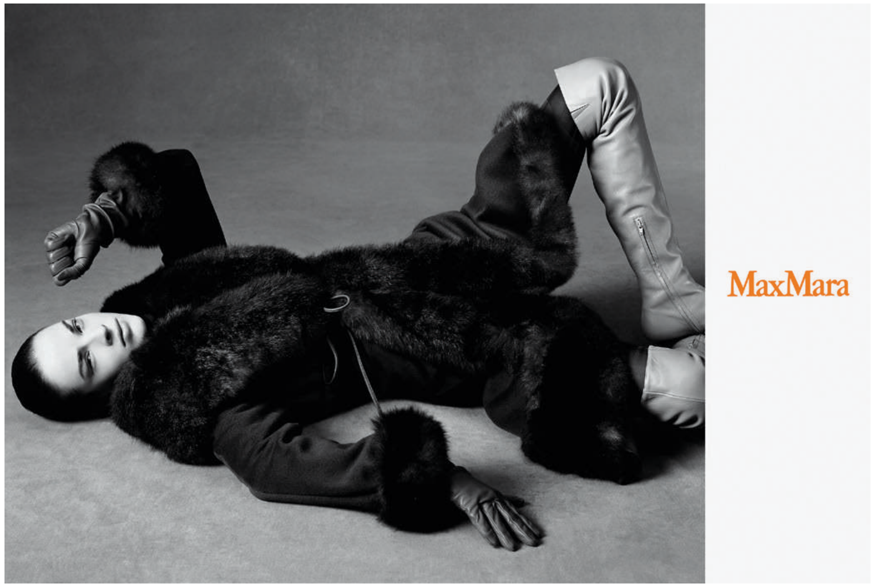
Carolyn Murphy, Autumn/Winter 1999-2000



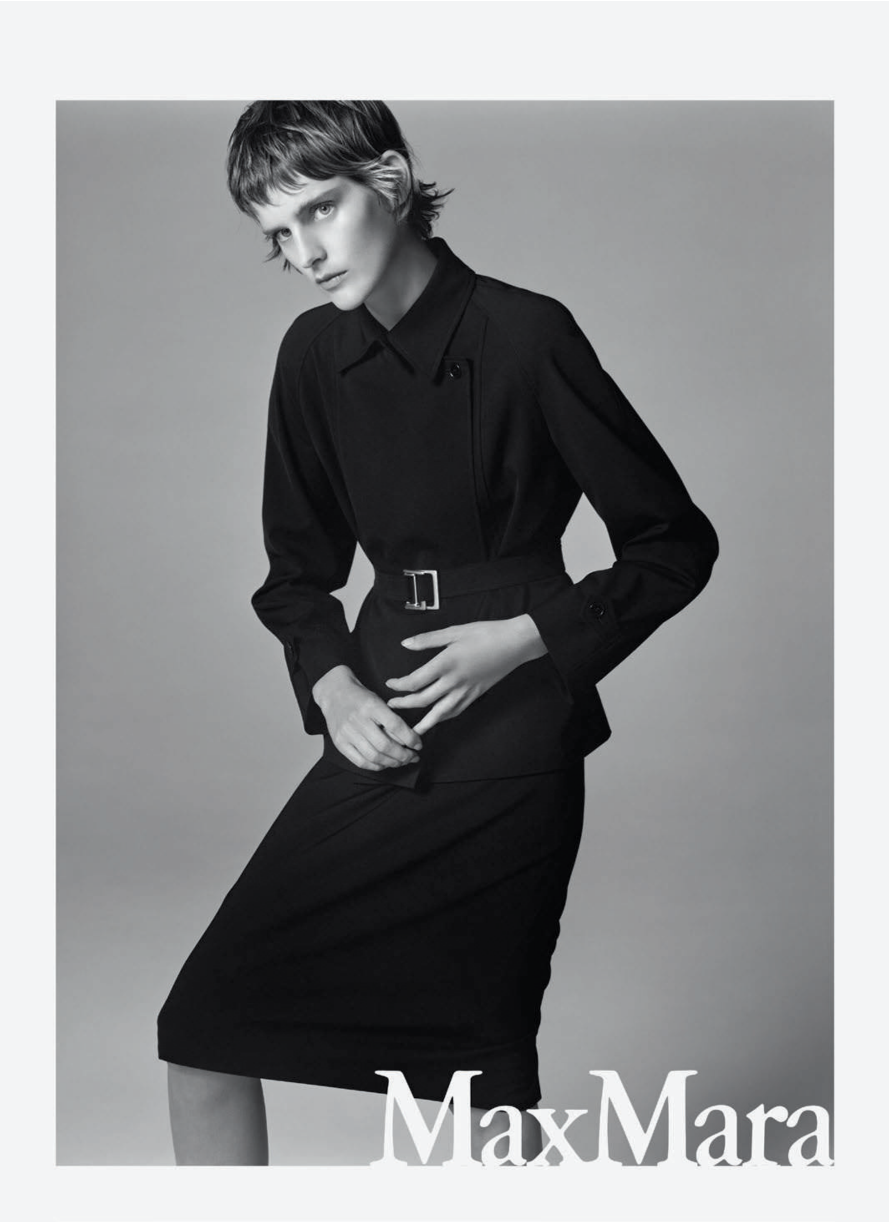
Carmen Kass, Spring/Summer 2001



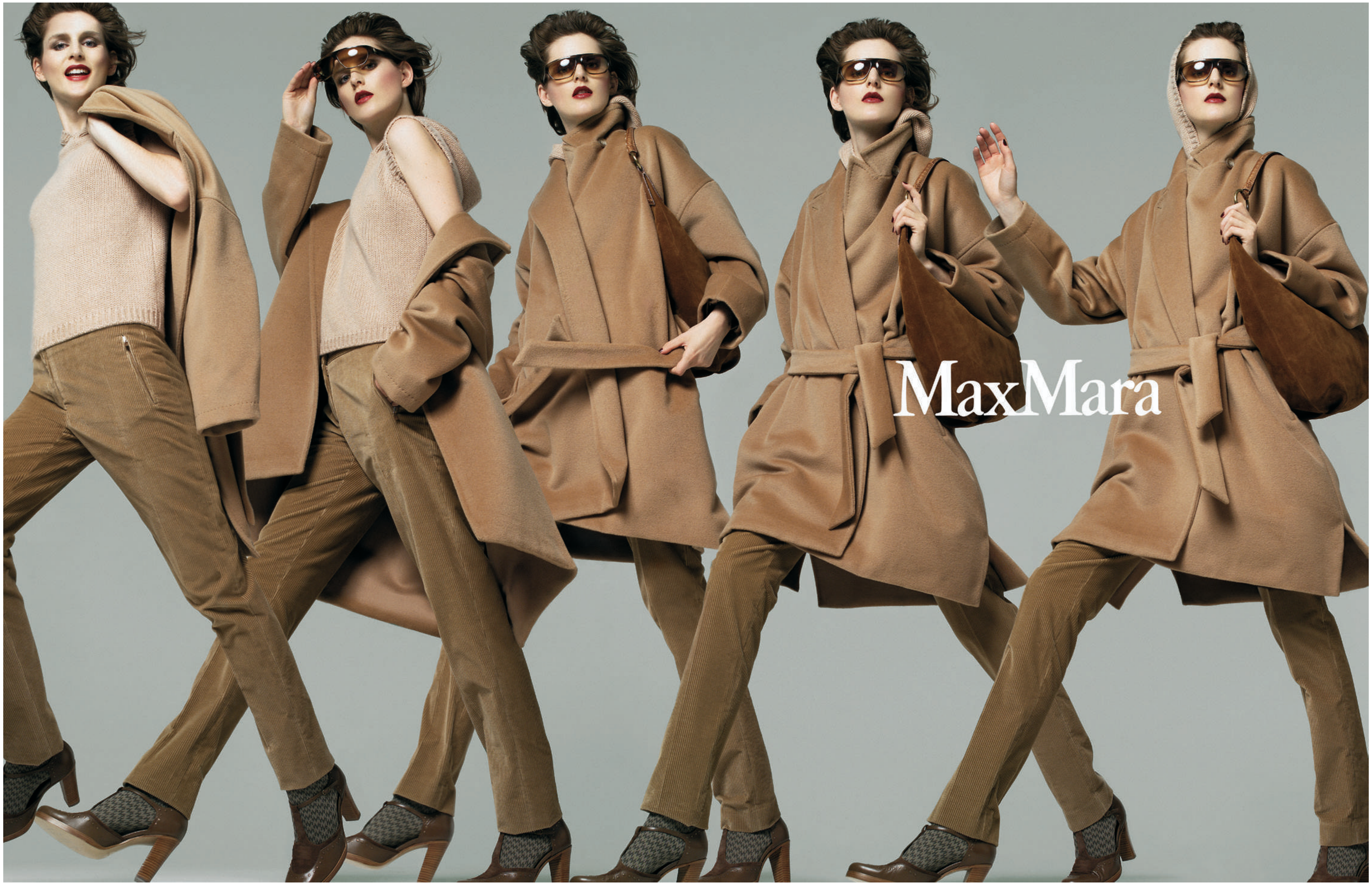
Liisa Winkler, Autumn/Winter 2001-2002



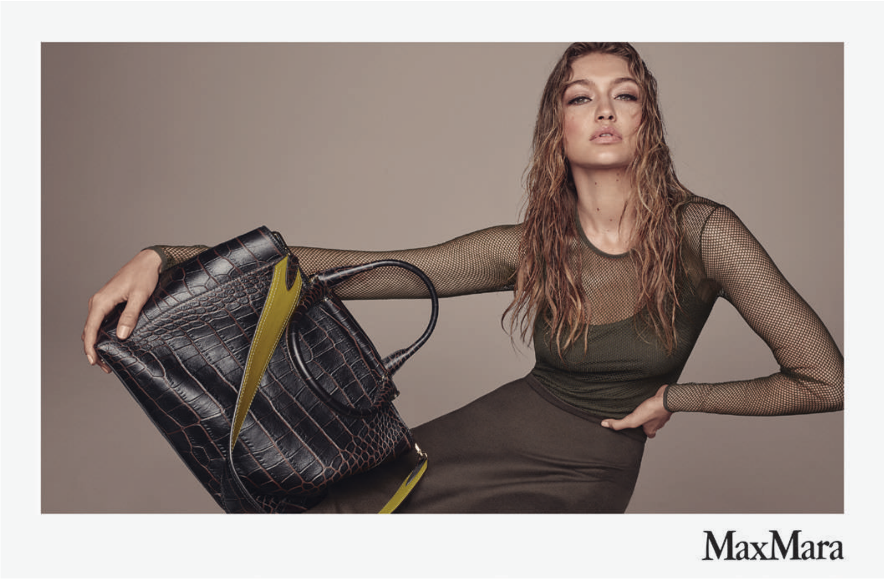
Leticia Birkheuer, Autumn/Winter 2003-2004



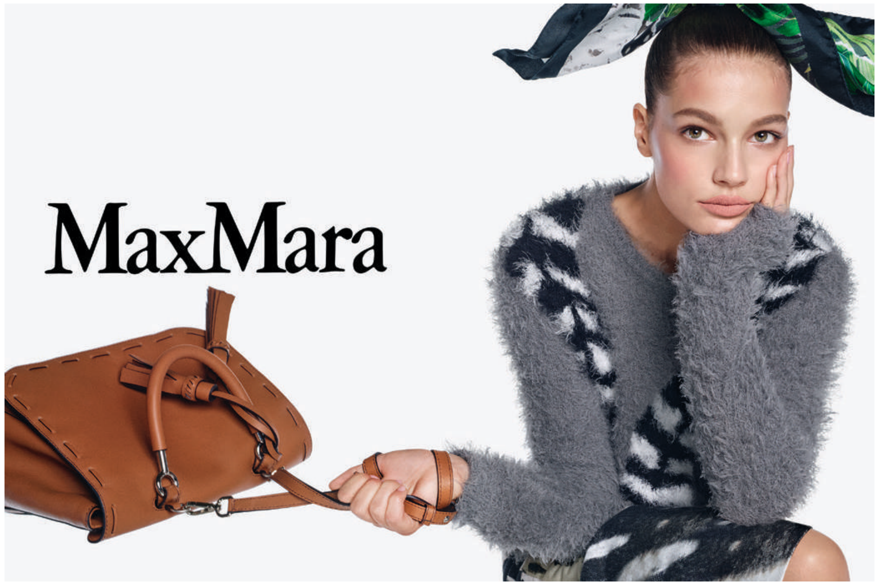
Stella Tennant, Spring/Summer 2002



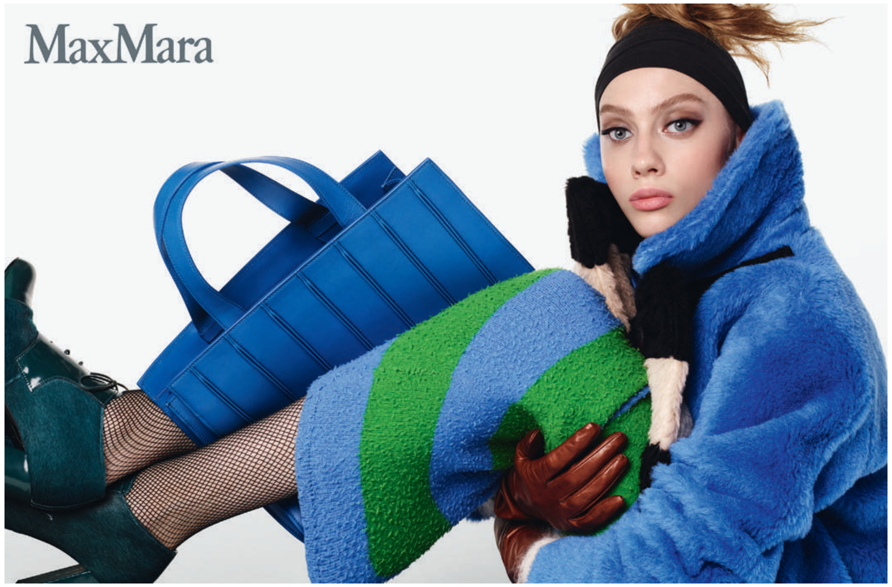
Stella Tennant, Autumn/Winter 2002-2003



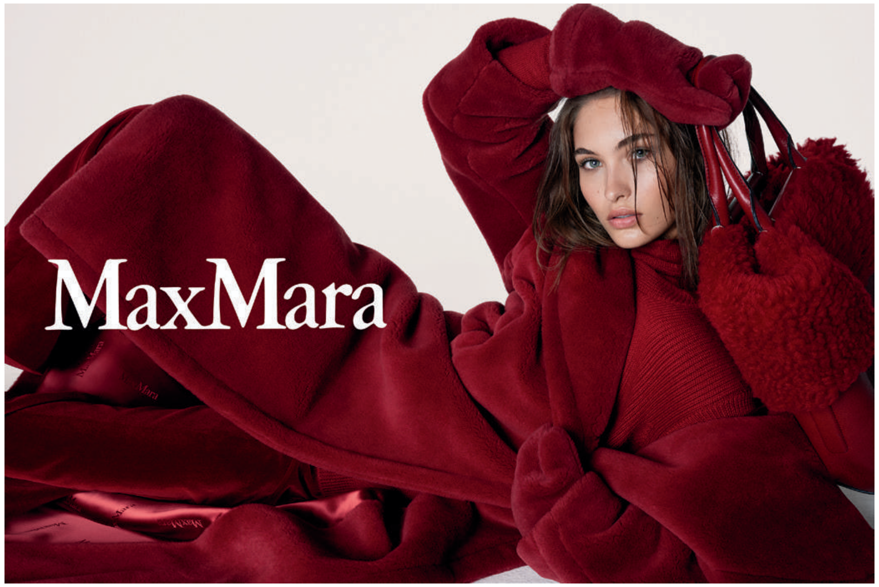
Gigi Hadid, Autumn/Winter 2016-2017



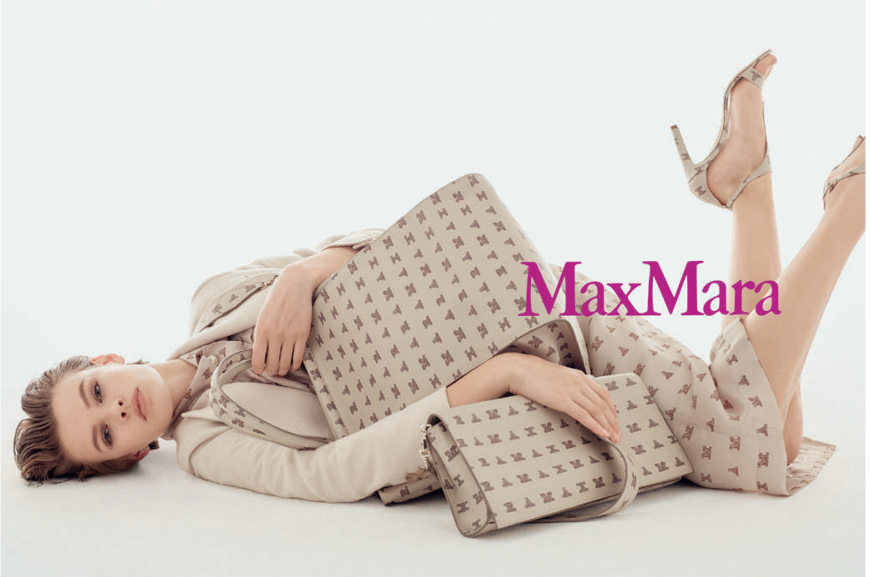
Faretta, Spring/Summer 2017



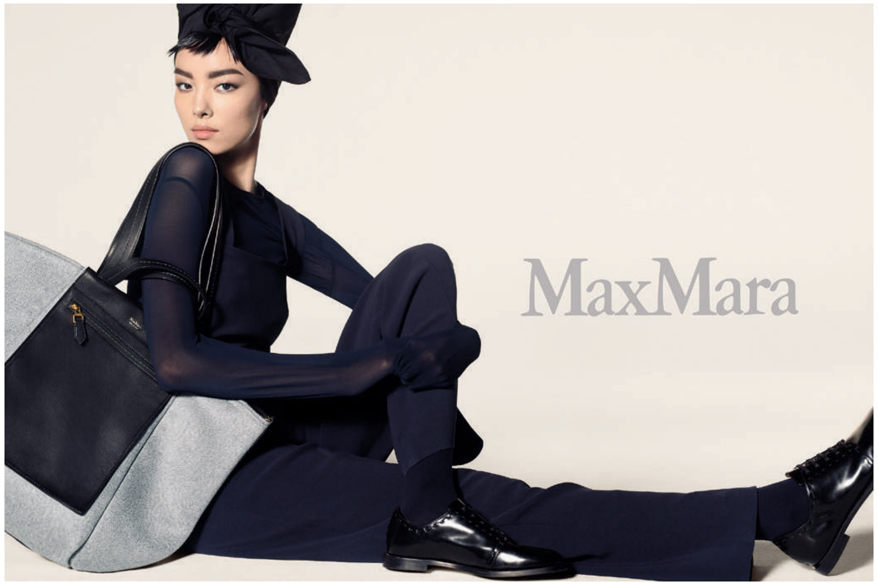
Odette Pavlova, Autumn/Winter 2016-2017



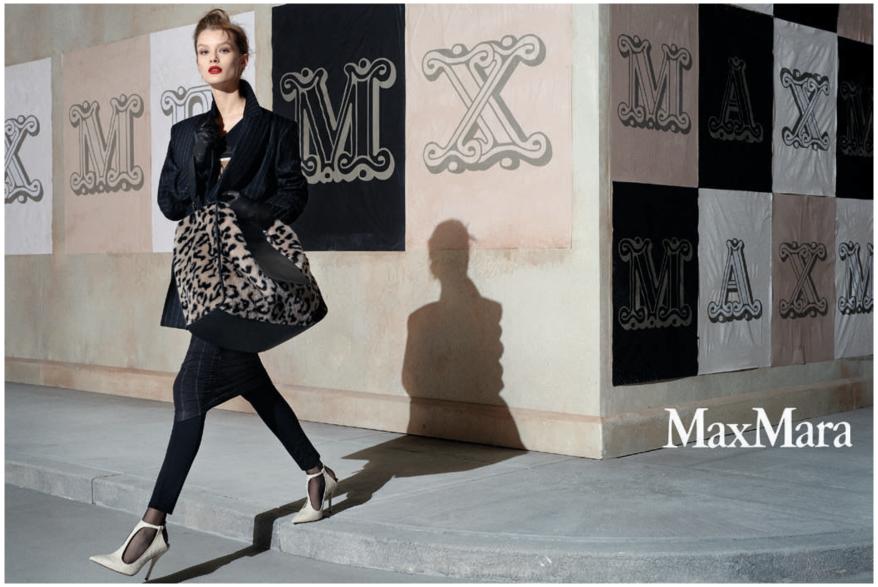
Grace Elizabeth, Autumn/Winter 2017-2018



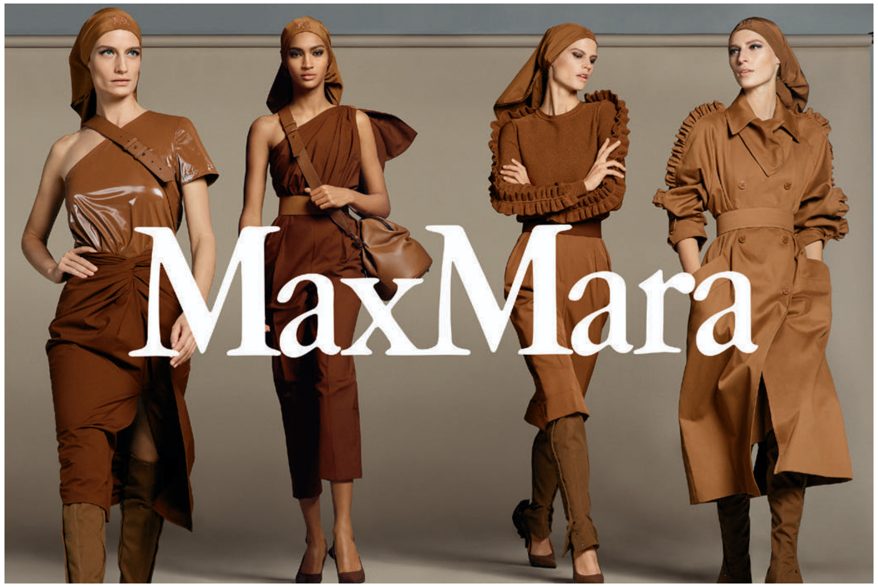
Cara Taylor, Spring/Summer 2018



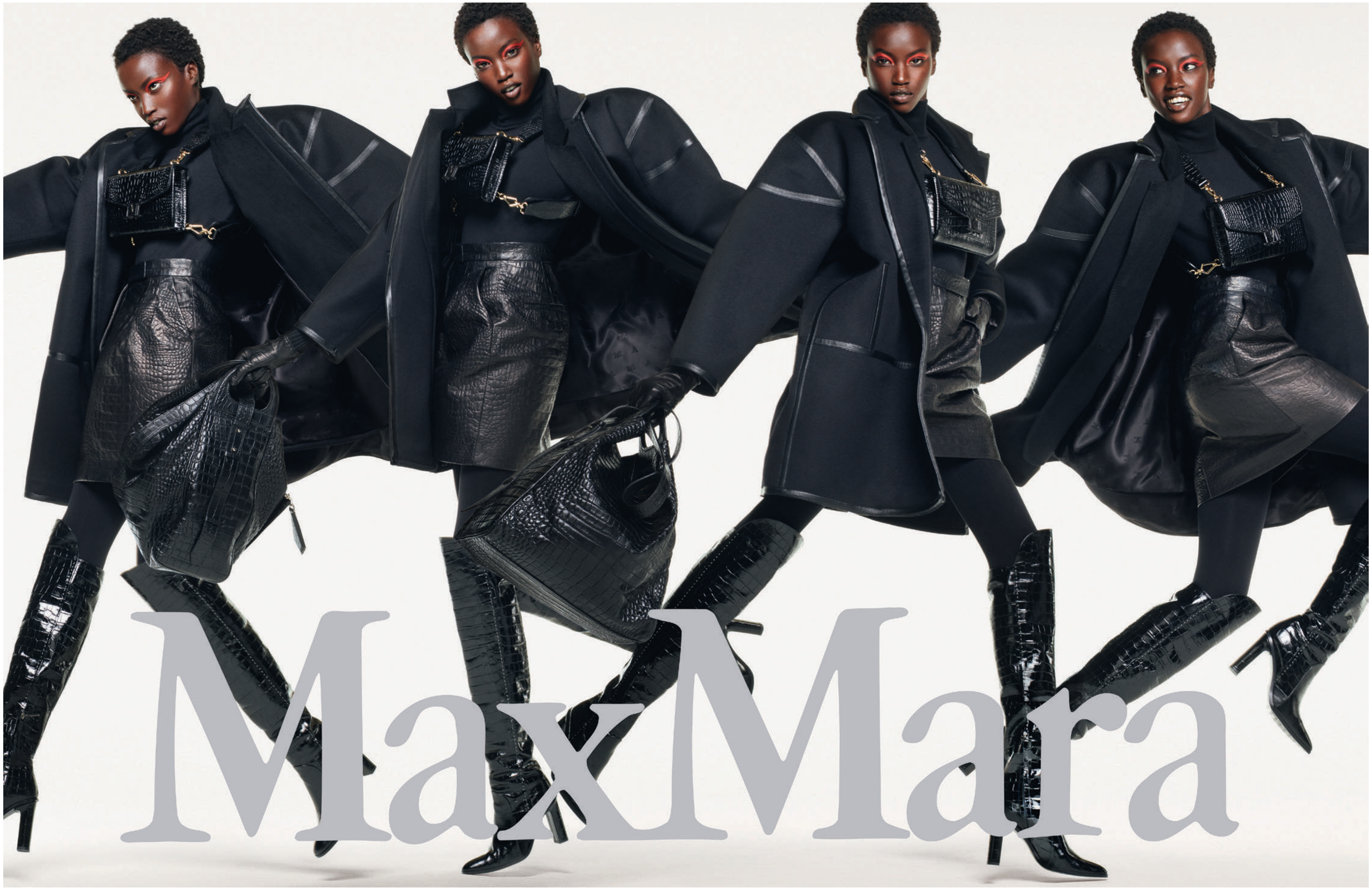
Fei Fei Sun, Pre-Fall 2018



Kristina Grikaite, Autumn/Winter 2018-2019



Veronika Kunz, Anyelina Rosa, Saskia de Brauw, Julia Nobis, Spring/Summer 2019



Anok Yai, Autumn/Winter 2019-2020

Change is fashion's pulse, the force that drives engagement, interest, and most importantly, sales. Except, it seems, at Max Mara. In an era when high-profile designers are appointed to create headline-grabbing fashion 'revolution', the Italian brand, founded in Reggio Emilia by Achille Maramotti in 1951, has followed its own path, guided by an idea too often dismissed in fashion: consistency. The brand's globally successful aesthetic of tailored, yet comfortable luxurywear in rich fabrics and a limited palette reveals this constancy of purpose, which can adapt to the moment, while remaining resolutely true to its essence.

Despite being shot by different photographers over the decades – from Richard Avedon to Sarah Moon to Paolo Roversi – Max Mara's advertising has always reflected this slowly evolving stability, choosing to demonstrate its contemporary relevance not through modish concepts, but rather by casting models – Anjelica Huston, Christy Turlington, Linda Evangelista, Gigi Hadid and Joan Smalls – who embody both the Max Mara woman and their time.

> ‘At Max Mara, we always say to ourselves: ‘We don't want to be hot, because what's hot will inevitably become cold before too long.’’

Over the past two decades, one photographer has best represented this consistent visual messaging and perfectly calibrated casting: Steven Meisel. Known for his long-standing relationships with magazines (he has shot over 350 covers for *Vogue Italia*) and brands (Prada and Versace), he has worked with Max Mara since 1997, creating campaigns that always remain fresh thanks to his visual sensitivity and the respect he pays to the clothes. *System* spoke to Giorgio Guidotti, Max Mara's head of global communications, who himself has been at the brand for 32 years, about its ethos of evolution not revolution and how Steven Meisel *always* delivers.

Thomas Lenthal: What does advertising mean at Max Mara? Are there specific long-established visual codes that you are still following?

Giorgio Guidotti: Since day one back in the 1950s, one of our key principles has been that we make timeless, democratic fashion. So the narration around the brand has always been around the product, and the timeless and ageless woman wearing it. It is very important for us to be real; we make real clothes for real women – that is one of our working mottos. So what we try and do in our advertising campaigns is feature that real woman. Sometimes the style is stronger or less strong, or more or less fun, maybe one season she is a little sexier, another season a little sportier – but behind the styling, it is always that woman.

That seems to apply to the actual advertising images, too. They are incredibly consistent over the past 30 years. There's a stability in Max Mara's message, which is pretty remarkable.

In the company, we always say, ‘We don't want to be hot, because what is hot then becomes cold.’ We are famous for our timeless designer pieces, so this is another aspect we keep in mind for our advertising campaigns.

Working with great photographers over the years is another consistent aspect of the Max Mara brand story.

I've been here 32 years and the brand's owners have always given me lots of freedom to work with the best art directors, photographers and agencies in the business. That's been my big chance. Max Mara was already working with big photographers when I arrived and the first ones I worked with were Richard Avedon, Peter Lindbergh and Paolo Roversi in the late 1980s, early 1990s.

When did Max Mara begin working with Steven Meisel?

The *very* first time he worked with us was over 30 years ago, an advertorial for *Lei* for an iBlues collection of workwear and separates. They are beautiful images and so funny, like a fairy tale of girls in a garden. That was the first time his images became part of Max Mara history, but that was before my time. The first time he worked for the main line was with Linda Evangelista for the Spring/Summer 1997 campaign. It was great: this beautiful shot of Linda in a pant suit. She exuded freshness and glamour; it was effortless for her. Steven has never been afraid to do classic and he's never wanted to change the character of the brand; he really wants to express the clothing as best he can. Those very first images are so amazing. They are so ‘now’ and modern and timeless, and on a great model. Sometimes we think we should just buy the copyright and use them again!

You've worked with him for so long now. He's like this presence who comes and goes, but is somehow always around Max Mara. He has really helped define Max Mara in a very powerful and successful way.

We have done over 20 campaigns with Steven. He has such a great sense of fashion and style and modernity, yet he's actually a little bit like Max Mara – he's timeless. He understands the clothes like no one else. Some photographers can be excellent, but they don't care about the fashion, just the image. For us, the fashion is so important in the narration – and he knows that and he knows how to make it now. He always wants to see the clothes in advance and there is always a little back and forth with the casting, but we trust him. There is never a drama though because he is so great with casting. We always get the best models, not because he is powerful in the industry, but because he makes such precious suggestions.

> ‘Those earliest campaigns are still so ‘now’ and modern and timeless. Sometimes we think we should just buy the copyright and use them again!’

And so how is it from campaign to campaign with Steven Meisel? Do you go to him with a very defined concept?

We communicate beforehand; we never go on set with the clothes and say, ‘Let's try to find something.’ We always choose the fashion first, more or less, define the look, and then just before the show, we build the concept, which he respects. Steven really works on the look of the girl, the make-up and the hair.

You are on set, right?

Yes, Steven is very private and very few people are allowed on set. It is basically his team, hair and make-up, the stylist, and one or two clients. No more. And I am always very respectful. I don't go on the set and say, ‘Let me fix the jacket or can we change this or that?’ Everything has been decided pretty much before, so once you are there, the days are not too long. He is very organized, so changing an idea while on set is not really what you do with Steven. We never come back from New York with something we didn't expect for Max Mara.

How many images do you shoot on a campaign these days with Steven?

We do five in a one-day shoot.

It's very fast.

Once he finds the look, he is fast. He goes for perfection; that is what he likes. It might take five hours to get the look, but then he is very fast once he gets the look and the girl, once he finds what he likes and what we like.

Quite often, you use the group shot with Steven. Is there a reason for that?

It's because Max Mara is for every woman. The next campaign in September is also a group shot with girls of different ages; it is very nice. The idea of the show was almost like an aristocratic British family, so we did a little bit of that, but only women. The men were probably outside hunting!

Let's discuss the models. When the general aesthetic and approach to the campaign is so remarkably consistent, as it has been over the decades, then the variable that best defines any given era is the model. What makes the Max Mara woman at any given time?

Max Mara has always worked with the best models: from Angelica Houston before my time to Linda and Christy [Turlington], Carla Bruni – always the very best!

So what makes a model Max Mara? Is it hair, make-up and styling that allow her to become that Max Mara woman?

Yes, but also because the models we use have a timeless beauty. Today it is all about diversity and I totally agree with that, so we have continued with timeless beauty, but in a more diverse way.

What about stylists?

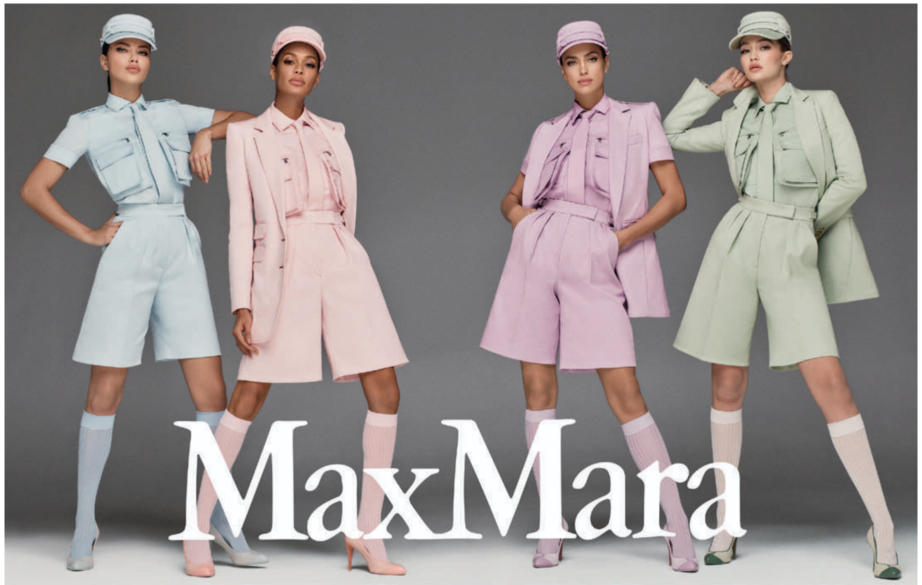
With Steven we've worked with different stylists. The first was Barbara Dente, a legendary stylist from the 1980s and 1990s. She worked regularly with Mapplethorpe – he took a funny portrait of her as Olive Oyl from *Popeye* – and she was the person who connected us with Steven. She was really a great stylist. We also worked with Brana Wolf, Lori Goldstein, and then Carine Roitfeld for a few seasons.

What are the metrics of success for a Max Mara campaign? How do you establish that this was a great campaign or not so much?

If we sell those clothes, that's a success. That is what the campaign is for, to confirm a brand and to help the company. The campaign is really a chance for us to shoot the physical product. We are very consistent with our colour palette – camel, brown, a touch of red, these are the colours of Max Mara – and using that, plus the style of the woman, there is a danger of it becoming a little dusty. We always want to be modern, so the campaigns are about making Max Mara contemporary, yet timeless, and appealing. Also, we are an Italian brand and over the years we've found that Asian customers, for example, don't want to buy a product for the Asian market, they want to buy the brand as it is: Italian. So these campaigns are international, never shot with just one market in mind.

That's the beauty of fashion photography: it can speak to everyone around the world – it doesn't require words.
Exactly, and again it reflects the products. Some brands have specific products for specific markets, but we don't do that. Of course, sizes will change and maybe some countries will buy more of one colour, but the bestsellers are the same all over the world.

What's your take on the future? Are you starting to explore other avenues for advertising?
Beautiful images are going to be seen on different media; it doesn't matter if it is digital. Of course, there's all the collateral material now, which we never thought about producing until five or six years ago. You really have to think about other channels and build that more into your production; that is important now. Being a big company with strong shoulders, we can afford to do the full 360 degrees, so we should. The last video we did with Steven Meisel, with all the girls dancing, I think is instantly iconic, and personally, I'm really excited that that campaign by Steven can be seen by the readers of *Grazia* and also seen by a million viewers on our Instagram accounts too. That's just very exciting. To build a strong image, you still need the quality shoot as part of the 360 degrees. You can have a lot of those small assets, but you need the big statements, too – and that is why there are still fashion shows and why there is still beautiful advertising.



Adriana Lima, Joan Smalls, Irina Shayk and Gigi Hadid, Spring/Summer 2020

The future of spaces.

As the world continues to face the Covid-19 crisis, *System* has nevertheless been keen to look forward. So we decided to explore the effects – positive or otherwise – that the pandemic's enforced isolation and immobility might be having on the cultural spaces that fashion and its peripheral domains occupy, and what the future holds for them.

We embraced the ambiguity of the term 'spaces', its fluidity allowing multiple visions and interpretations, all different, all valid: the concrete plans of a public cultural institution; the shifting geopolitics of the global market; the visceral desire for congregation; and the environments we create in which we communicate and express ourselves. *System* invited a group of unique voices from the worlds of art and culture to share their own thoughts and feelings about the future of spaces: architect Rem Koolhaas, filmmaker Jenn Nkiru, creative collective No Vacancy Inn, and museum director Chris Dercon.

The conversations on the following pages convey a collective sense of reflection, uncertainty and turbulence, yet retain a feeling of cautious optimism. As Chris Dercon sagely puts it, 'I don't want to say that it's an exciting time, but it is an *important* time.'

**Interviews by Rahim Attarzadeh,
Claudia Donaldson and Jonathan Wingfield**

Rem Koolhaas

If the future's your subject *du jour*, an ideal starting point is a chat with Dutch architect, urbanist, theorist, and all-round big thinker Rem Koolhaas. With his architecture firm OMA, he conjures up the kind of buildings that are as spectacular as they are pioneering, mixing intensive research and investigation with a taste for avant-garde design. In Asia, he's delivered projects such as CCTV, the monumental headquarters of China's state broadcasting company in Beijing, while in the US, his work includes the intricate and multilayered Seattle Central Library. There's also his 20-year collaboration with Prada, working continuously on the brand's shops, set design and its art foundation in Milan. Perhaps more than any single project, though, Rem is best known for being a kind of one-man think tank, travelling the world and bringing his experiences and encounters into new buildings, books, exhibitions, and above all, ideas. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, Rem was uncharacteristically at home in Amsterdam when *System* Zoomed in to discuss the importance of naivety, overdosing on the smoothness of digital screens, and the physical serenity that comes with living without jet lag.

Portrait by Willy Vanderperre

Photograph by Agostino Osio, courtesy of OMA

Prada, Autumn/Winter 2021 menswear presentation

Jonathan Wingfield: A spectacularly obvious opening question: what made you want to become an architect?

Rem Koolhaas: At some point in, I think, 1966, I went with an architect friend to Russia, which at the time was pretty inaccessible. My friend was doing research on constructivism and Soviet art of the 1920s and 1930s, and we met a number of survivors from that period. I also saw first-hand that in the 1920s, Russian architects were less concerned with shape and form than they were with proposing alternative ways to live. One project in particular left a big impression on me: a proposal to abandon cities and replace them with linear chains of single rooms on stilts. Each room had a small external staircase, which would lead into countryside or forests, and in each room would live a single person. This was not only a question of dismantling the city; it was also dismantling the family. If people wanted to stay together, they would simply form a chain of these single rooms, and every half a kilometre there would be a communal school, communal hospital, communal kitchen. It was such a graphic demonstration of how architecture could express imagination about how people could live and in what kind of conditions, and what the possibilities of life in the future could be. And it led me to think about pursuing architecture myself.

> **‘I’m deeply nostalgic for a period in which risk-taking was more respected, and even considered a crucial component of civilization and coexistence.’**

Do you remain as awestruck about the possibilities of architecture, as this almost naive ideal for living?

I used to be very sceptical about architecture, thinking that it was a regressive discipline with little affinity for the modern world, which constantly missed the point of technical developments. I’ve recently become much more interested in it though, as a profession that depends, on one hand, on almost scientific precision, and on the other, on what you refer to as naivety and I would probably call idealism. Without that naivety, architecture becomes very banal and flat; it’s something that you really have to protect and incorporate.

We’re speaking in February 2021. You’re well known for your peripatetic existence; how has the forced immobility of the pandemic affected you and your work?

Most of the projects we were involved in are still going ahead, but I’ve also been quite adamant that working remotely or via Zoom is not enough to force creative insights or breakthroughs, and so, at regular intervals, when it’s been necessary, we have created moments of togetherness – of course, with new distances and in new environments and sometimes in the open air. But at the same time, it’s been extremely interesting to begin to have a totally different relationship with my home, with the city of Amsterdam, with the Netherlands. Many people have had that experience of taking their own environment a lot more seriously, which has its good sides and its claustrophobic sides. The other great thing about enforced immobility is that there is no jet lag, which creates a kind of physical serenity.

For many people the pandemic has brought about accelerated or intensified feelings of nostalgia. What are you feeling nostalgic for?

For the past five years, I’ve been feeling very nostalgic about something that I tried to articulate in the Venice Biennale, where I said that the current culture has replaced the French Revolution’s motto of *liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité* with ‘comfort, security and sustainability’. This has created a complete aversion to risk. I’m deeply nostalgic for a period in which risk-taking was more respected, and even considered a crucial component of civilization and coexistence. That aversion to risk has clearly multiplied in the pandemic. Right now, risk almost seems like an obscenity.

You recently collaborated with American Express on a ‘Centurion Art Card’ that features an image of one of your unrealized projects. Can you tell me about the original project, and its renewed significance in the context of a credit card?

One of the effects of the pandemic has been a total proliferation of the credit card. It’s become totally ubiquitous, even more so than when American Express first said they wanted to work on one with us. The project we did is called Boompjes, which literally translates as ‘small trees’. It was one of those real-life movie moments: I was invited to see a councillor for Rotterdam who was sitting in front of the map of the whole city. He asked me in a kind of grandiose tone, ‘Where do you want to build?’ There was a very interesting site on the river, defined on one side by a bridge, on the other by the water, on the third by the highway, and on the fourth by a building. It was constrained, but on every side there was a different condition. The project we developed there represented the transition between being a theoretical architect and a real architect, with a real building, in a real city. All of the elements in it – the programme, the location, the experience – were derived from one single drawing, because we needed something condensed to convince the politicians. That drawing, the drawing now on the credit card, represents a transitional moment for me.

The project ultimately never got built, which is such a common thing in the field of architecture. How did you feel at the time?

We work hard to make all of our projects happen in the real world, but if they don’t, we at least demand of them that they make a statement relevant to the discipline of architecture and explore an issue beyond the individual project itself. It felt deeply crushing when that project was not made, but it was also an incentive to find ways to establish a career in architecture through other forms, such as through books and writing.

> **‘Overdosing on the smoothness of a screen – particularly the fake smoothness of the rendering – makes authentic feeling in architecture vital.’**

This time last year – almost to the day – you were at the Guggenheim in New York, opening your exhibition *Countryside, The Future*. The theme now feels eerily prescient, given the ways that we’ve seen cities become these empty and somewhat dystopian vessels, and how the countryside has become so profoundly appealing to many city dwellers. What was your original thinking behind the exhibition, and how has the pandemic altered or intensified its meaning?

There were two original triggers. Over the years, I have often taken holidays in the same village in Switzerland, where there was a lot of farming, and which, as a village, felt stable. But at some point, maybe 15 years ago, there was a radical and rapid transformation. The original population of the village disappeared, farms disappeared, cows disappeared, and were replaced by boutiques. You saw this great acceleration of change, much faster than I had ever witnessed in a city. That was one thing. The other is something the UN reported in about 2007: half of mankind was living in cities, and in 30 years that percentage was going to increase to 70 percent. It took a while to realize how incredibly radical that would be. The larger part of the world would undergo a halving of its population, which would be a total revolution…

…a countryside revolution that you wanted to investigate?

The city has become the inevitable subject in architecture, partly because it was supposed to be the future of mankind. So, almost out of contrariness, I then said, ‘OK, if the city is so important, what about the countryside?’ We looked for about 15 rural sites in the world, where in each case something unique was happening, something that could tell us about the changes to the countryside.

And then the pandemic happened.

In the beginning, people had thought it was highly eccentric of us to focus on the countryside, and then suddenly the countryside became the only kind of foreign place they could go to. That is, of course, also the first step in gentrification. The countryside itself does benefit to some extent – it feels slightly more credible – but it’s definitely not about getting a second house in the countryside.

Was a pandemic something you’d ever had to formally consider when working on a building or an urbanism project in the past?

When I was working on the CCTV building in Beijing we were interrupted by the original wave of SARS; in China, that had an incredibly devastating effect, maybe even more radical than Covid-19. So, yes, I experienced that whole scenario and its paralysing effect on the society. Being completely locked down in Chinese cities in the winter was an amazing thing to see, and so was the ambition to overcome it.

What would you like to see change in architecture in the forthcoming decade?

As an architect, I’m so stuck in the current moment that predicting the future makes me nervous. For instance, I have absolutely no idea whether that shift to the city is inevitable, or whether a shift back to the country could be imminent. What I do have is a very strong expectation that the future will be much less unilateral than previously thought. In about 1991, it seemed that history was over and that the world would become a single, large, integrated economy and a single, large, liberal political system. But it is obvious now that that is not going to happen and that confident predictions for the entire world are untenable.

Do you think architecture's greatest current and future concern should be its impact on the environment?
Looking to the future, you won't need a hierarchy between beauty, practicality and sustainability. This will require a complete rethinking of architecture and also a complete reimagining of the science and knowledge necessary to produce architecture. To truly think about sustainability, constructing in wood, recycling or slogans is not enough. The environment will be not so much a priority as an enabler of an entirely new architecture.

Do you feel a sense of responsibility in initiating that shift?
We certainly haven't initiated it, but we have thought about it. One thing to be said in favour of architecture is that in the 1960s, everything we know now was already known in terms of the limits to growth, the effects of global warming, the need to change the economy. So any architect who trained in my generation is still vaguely committed to all of that. But it's only now that there is the general political awareness and, increasingly, the obligation to change.

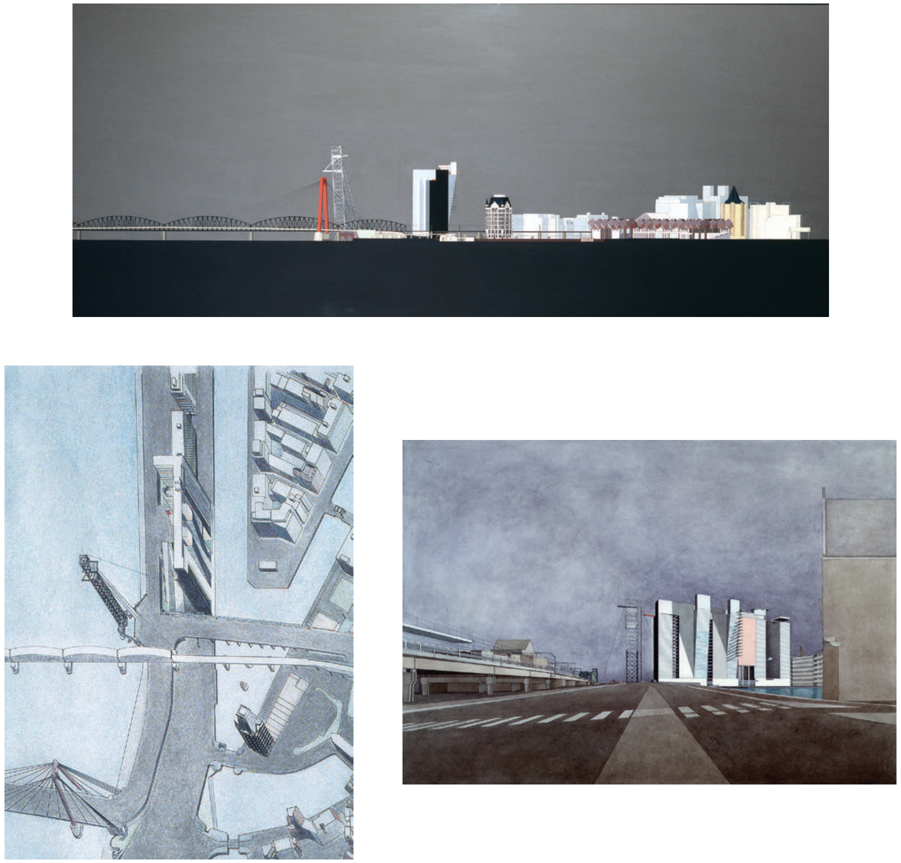
The pandemic has highlighted, for better or worse, that we can fulfil many of our needs online. How do you think this might affect the role that physical spaces play in our lives?
I honestly have no idea. I have a number of friends and colleagues who engineer their Zoom backgrounds to create a kind of virtual space – a paradise or a serious, intellectual environment – from which to present themselves. Maybe there will be an increase in the use of virtual reality as an effective architectural or virtual environment, as a form of identity-building architecture, which may be good because then architecture can focus on other things.

The Prada shows that you worked on earlier this year presented models walking through small spaces in which the surfaces had a kind of exaggerated tactility: voluminous fake fur, resin, marble. You could almost feel them, even watching through a mobile phone. Might this exaggerated tactility become required in our physical spaces, since the digital documentation of our lives will dictate how we experience much of the world?
I agree that the screen affects things in terms of texture and surface. If you look at our own recent work, that might be why we used a very tangible and rough form of travertine in the Qatar National Library. So, yes, I'm sure that overdosing on the smoothness of a screen – and particularly the kind of fake smoothness of the rendering – makes some kind of authentic feeling in real architecture very important.

Everyone talks about missing public cultural spaces, but in reality do you think there might be a longer-term reluctance to re-embrace them?
As soon as it becomes possible again, there will be a real eagerness for interaction, on the level of friendships, relationships, tribes, milieux, to reassume traditional roles in traditional environments. For example, a serious eagerness to go back to the theatre.

Would you say that aesthetic beauty is still a defining ambition in architecture, when it feels more broadly that practical or ethical concerns are more significant to our collective future?
I've always found it complex to pursue beauty on its own, and have always been incredibly excited when beauty emerged almost inadvertently or unintentionally. For me, beauty is so elusive that if you go after it, it will escape. But if your efforts are about intelligence or articulating particular moments with a particular sharpness, a beauty can emerge. Beauty remains very important, but more as a kind of intellectual moment than as a simply sensual moment that you can work from. We've long been working on preservation strategies, and exhibited some of the work at the 2010 Venice Biennale. People typically want to preserve the most beautiful, unique, exceptional things, but I am equally interested in preserving the generic. If you want to understand the past, you need to know what it looked like, rather than creating a misleading perception that comes from only preserving the beautiful things. I guess what I'm trying to say is: don't just look at the highlights.

Is there a building somewhere in the world whose wildly appealing beauty you're quite happy just to surrender to?
Many. Almost anything Roman, almost anything in Paris, almost anything in Beijing, almost anything on Red Square – I'm very tolerant.



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C F FROST
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Original plans from an early 1980s OMA project in Rotterdam, entitled Boompjes;
a 1982 Boompjes image as featured on the new Rem Koolhaas American Express Centurion Art Card

Jenn Nkiru

This is Jenn Nkiru's time. The London-born filmmaker won Best Music Video at the 2021 Grammy Awards for 'Brown Skin Girl', her latest collaboration with cultural powerhouse Beyoncé Knowles-Carter and featuring a cast including Kelly Rowland, Lupita Nyong'o, Adut Akech, Aweng Ade-Chuol, and Naomi Campbell. Nkiru's meteoric rise began in 2014, fuelled by films that are rich multi-sensory experiences, combining archival material, assemblage and live footage in an exploration and re-definition of Blackness. These have included award-winning 2017 short *Black Star: Rebirth is Necessary* and 2019 documentary *BLACK TO TECHNO*, which unearthed techno's roots in Detroit. In an ongoing attempt to reconcile the past with the future, Nkiru uses aspects of the built environment to create dynamic dreamscapes, occupied by people exploring a metaphorical space of transcendence, negotiating the boundaries between their interior and exterior lives. With confidence, empathy, and technique, Nkiru creates space for humanity to find itself in her work, while exploring her own cosmic beliefs drawn from Afrofuturism and late jazz pioneer Sun Ra. Having recently returned to London after an extended period of travelling and shooting, Nkiru caught up with Claudia Donaldson, publisher of *Cloakroom* magazine, to discuss the importance of mystique and why she loves Peckham like Spike Lee loves Brooklyn.

Portrait by Juergen Teller

© Jenn Nkiru

Still from Kamasi Washington 'Hub-Tones', 2018

Claudia Donaldson: So you've been away for the past five months, right?

Jenn Nkiru: Yes, I started off in LA, and then I went to Hawaii, then Madrid, then Mexico City. And once I wrapped in Mexico City, I went to Oaxaca for a break. I planned to be there for seven days and ended up staying four weeks. I just needed some reprieve. [Laughs] And the day before I left we'd won the Grammy for Best Music Video for 'Brown Skin Girl'. So, along with needing physical rest, I also took a moment of reflection, trying to take stock of where I'm at, where I want to be, where I want to go next. I am constantly trying to reflect and reframe. It's interesting that this conversation is all around space, because 2020 was the first time in a long time where I had to be physically stationary in one space.

> **'I consider myself tenacious. I'm not here because people said, 'Yeah, she should be in the room!' I'm here because I kept knocking on the door.'**

You grew up in Peckham in South London and once said, 'I love Peckham like Spike Lee loves Brooklyn', which makes me smile. You lived your formative years there, and then you left London in your 20s to go to Howard University in Washington, DC. What did you miss most when you left?

It's where I grew up, where I went to school. It always felt like the perfect microcosm for what a blending of cultures could look like. I didn't start travelling until I was 13, with my parents.

Your dad used to hold salons at home, right? Inviting people from all over the world to come and talk. His work was journalistic and political, and your mum worked in computer programming. How would you say that they influenced you?

Our home was really interesting. We lived on a North Peckham estate, a space that is lower-working class, and yet my parents had these qualifications. My dad for the majority of my childhood was a student. My mum was a student for some of my childhood because I remember going to uni with her.

Were you proud of her?

Absolutely. As a kid, your environment is your environment; you don't know any different. We just had our routine! [Laughs] We'd hop on the number 12 bus, stop at Wimpy, this guy would drop a Wimpy burger in my sandwich box, and we'd head off to the university where I'd sit in the library. My mum would be there with her school friends, working and programming. My parents were as much individuals as they were a couple. And they were very much the inverse of what people typically think parenting should be; they were like, 'You're going to have to figure yourself into our lives.' Not in a cruel way, just, 'These are my interests and this is what I do and you're my kid, so you can figure yourself out.' That level of independence. And as much as they were very much Nigerians – very traditional in some respects – they were also very liberal in ways that maybe some of my peers' parents weren't.

So you felt like you were encouraged to have a voice?

Definitely. What I am talking about is this blend of culture and curiosity and having parents who are thinkers. We were encouraged to be curious and ask questions and, you know, if you feel something is wrong, how would you make it right? You don't just complain about things; you have to engage. It's all about engagement, and having a vision of what you feel things could be. And there was a very strong conversation being held around Pan-Africanist ideas and politics and diplomacy and democracy. Very lofty things falling on the ears of a child, but I was still invited to give opinions. One thing I really love, culturally, is parents giving the sense of a space that they have created for themselves, of the life that they have created for themselves, and then their children have to find themselves in that space. That also meant that they invited us in; we were watching, observing and getting involved in a real, dynamic way. These kinds of experiences allowed me to understand different backgrounds and different perspectives, based on being, for want of a better term, privy to these things. And there are the transformative powers of the spaces I grew up in, because Peckham now is not what Peckham used to be. We weren't middle class; we weren't living in a neighbourhood with detached houses.

You talk about it in a tender way, which makes me think of Andrea Arnold; I read somewhere that you said her film *Fish Tank*[1] is one of your favourites. And it just made me think about women in cinema and the parallels. You both share unconventional professional backgrounds. Andrea Arnold was a dancer on *Top of the Pops* and a TV presenter before she became a filmmaker, and you studied law and worked as a commissioning assistant at Channel 4. Would you say that these roles in your life feed into the work that you're making now?

Absolutely. These different aspects aid me in different ways. I consider myself a tenacious person. I am not here because people said, 'Yeah, she should be in the room!' I'm here because I kept knocking on the door, you know? I feel like I've made choices in terms of how I tend to view things; I'm always looking for the soul in the thing.

There's this beautiful tension between the local and universal in your work. Individual versus collective. Soul and transcendence. There's this constant play in which protagonists are often closing their eyes, a feeling of constant negotiation between the boundaries of your interior life and your exterior life.

> **'I'm not reading textbooks and coming to an exact estimation. I'm giving my dreams, my relationships with spirit, academia, pop culture, friends, family.'**

I'm always looking for universality and specificity. If we can be specific, it actually does resonate universally in a really exact way. And then there's my own cosmic belief of us existing in multiple realms and the kind of jostling between the external, performative, representational side of who we are, versus the internal, somatic kind of feeling and being of who we are, and what that conversation is, and how we see spillages and leakages of these things, which tend not to happen in the more well-choreographed moments in life. In the creation of work, there is always a sense of these moments, so that you can key into the emotionality of this person's experience in this space.

There's such a strong sense of emotional space in your work. In your video for Kamasi Washington's 'Hub-Tones', the use of styling is emphatic in drawing this out. You've got this incredible woman with bejewelled eyes wearing a silver headdress. She's like this Nina Simone figure with incredible obsidian nails, clutching a tambourine. She's totally in her emotion; there's a transcendence. She looks totally free. You seem able to self-connect and intervene, to press pause, if it's needed. So on a day-to-day basis, how do you keep spiritually fit? Is there a practice?

Such a good question. I don't know if I have a practice. I try to find spirit in all I do, if that makes sense: in my consideration for others, in how I'm feeding myself, in what I'm tolerating, in where I'm finding my joy, how I'm talking someone through an idea. Finding moments of stillness and aloneness even just for one minute. On a more day-to-day level, in spaces that are often moving so fast, I'm trying to keep mindful and present and respectful and in close conversation with my humanity. Because I feel like there are so many things – situations, people – that can pull you out of that. I'm always trying to stay true to self on some level.

Especially on large-scale productions when you're leading a big group of people, bringing emotional intelligence to what you're doing is so integral to the success of a project. Going back to the styling though, it's an important part of your film-making. You worked with stylist Ib Kamara on *Rebirth Is Necessary*. What was it like? Had you worked with him before that?

I had seen Ib's work really early on and I just thought he was brilliant. I remember mentioning to him that I really wanted him to do costumes for *Rebirth is Necessary*, because I felt like we were kindreds on many levels. I try to work with people who *question* ideas of how things should be on a very unapologetic, self-determined, curious level. My work serves as reportage and evidence of the process. That's all the work is – it's just a materialization of an experience that we all shared at some point in time. When working with collaborators I always think about being at peace with my ego and letting people come into any space that I create, so they feel confident. Even in commercial projects, I say, 'You know that idea you always wanted to play with and do? I'm giving you the space here to do that.' That's how we get work that is pushing things and pushing perspectives. Ibrahim is, you know, just an incredible… I miss him so much! [Laughs] And we actually did a piece with Neneh Cherry together, as well.

That video for 'Kong' is beautiful and Neneh looks incredible in it. There's this tension of the unseen and seen. The hat covering her eyes…

I love that. On a collective level, there's no longer much sense of mystique and curiosity and experimenting with the unknown. Everyone wants everything laid out. That's not interesting to me. There's a really childish magical-ness that I'm obsessed with and have held on to since I was a kid. And a lot of the time I'm focused on women, too, looking at the feminine interior. I didn't want to do 'Buffalo Stance 3.0'; Neneh's a woman over 50.[2] How do we give her humanity, show the fullness of her womanhood, and allow the audience to get a sense of who she is and where she's been, her confidence, but also her curiosity? There's a lot of speculation involved. It's not like I'm reading textbooks and coming to an exact estimation. I'm giving my dreams, my relationships with spirit, with academia, with pop culture, with my friends, my family, my contemporaries… I'm giving all of these things equal regard.

You're also combining rigorous historical research with poetic imagery. How do you strike the balance between intellect and emotion?
I don't know if I'm reaching the balance; I'm feeling my way through very intuitively. I haven't boiled it down to a science, but what I am really conscious of is joy. I like joy, and I like pleasure. [Laughs] So how do we take these ideas that could feel stuffy and intellectual and make them pleasurable?

You make them ecstatic. In my notes, I wrote 'remember ecstasy' because it's such an ever-present feeling in your work; I am reminded of dancing and coming up on ecstasy. In *BLACK TO TECHNO*, there's a multilayering of storytelling at play – narrative, visual, sonic – which reaches a climax as the narrator explains a near accident working in a factory in Detroit. He has this metal-stamping machine, which he calls Ginny, and the *only* time he ever put his hand into the machine, the press didn't come down, and then bang, the music comes in. Watching it, I felt how I used to feel when I would go clubbing. When I stopped taking drugs, I thought I was not going to feel the music any more, but actually, it never goes away.
It's in the music! I had a really beautiful conversation with the academic Tina Campt[3] back in November, and I was highlighting the differences between freedom and boundlessness. And my definition, as I explained it to Tina, is that freedom is concerned with the reclamation of something that's been taken away, whereas boundlessness is this more innate, human birthright that we're all familiar with and is supremely cosmic. And it's why you have such a world-tuned engagement when you feel it. The music doesn't feel unfamiliar – the feeling is so sweet that you don't have to tell your body what to do.

I love that. Music and its origins are so inherent to your film-making; your work helps restore Black culture to its rightful place. In *BLACK TO TECHNO*, we are shown Detroit as the birthplace of techno and Sister Rosetta Tharpe as the creator of rock and roll. Has she always been an influence?
I'm actually doing a project in response to a building Rem Koolhaas is making, and I'm looking at her in that context. His firm OMA is designing the new space for the Manchester International Festival. It's the old Granada studios in Manchester, and Sister Rosetta Tharpe made her way there at one point and played. So, it's interesting that we're having this conversation; the project is literally around the rapport between space and architecture and people.

Well, that's serendipity. He's one of the interviewees for this series.
Oh, wow! If it wasn't for the pandemic, we might have been having this conversation in that context, because that project will be a piece around my reading of architecture and space. It's still to be shot; it might be released next year.

I loved how *BLACK TO TECHNO* explores the built environment, how that shapes and influences musical expression and vice versa. Can you tell me a bit more about the physical aspects of creating spaces and backdrops in your films, the actual process?
My focus is always on feeling, so I'm like, 'I need these ingredients; this is the feeling I want to elicit and these are the ingredients that I want to add.' I'm always creating space with as many charged elements as possible to see what happens when they come together. There is just a scratch of the exactness of what things could be, but it's never defined. I'm looking at spaces like a lump of clay, at the sculptural aspect of what it is that I want to make exist, and I just have to uncover it. I feel like that's where things fall short, when people become so beholden to an idea and in anticipation of what it must look like. That's when everything stops growing, you know? I'm more like, 'What is the feeling here?' And I just keep tuning, tuning, tuning to the frequencies until it feels like the feeling. I enjoy my process; I don't always know exactly what everything is going to look like. For some people that might be scary, but for me, it's exciting.

© Jenn Nkiru

Still from *BLACK TO TECHNO*, 2019

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1. *Fish Tank* is an English coming-of-age drama by Academy-Award-winning social-realist filmmaker Andrea Arnold, starring Michael Fassbender, and Katie Jarvis as a 15-year-old girl living on a London housing estate and fascinated by her mother's boyfriend. It won a BAFTA for Best British Film and the Jury Prize at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival.

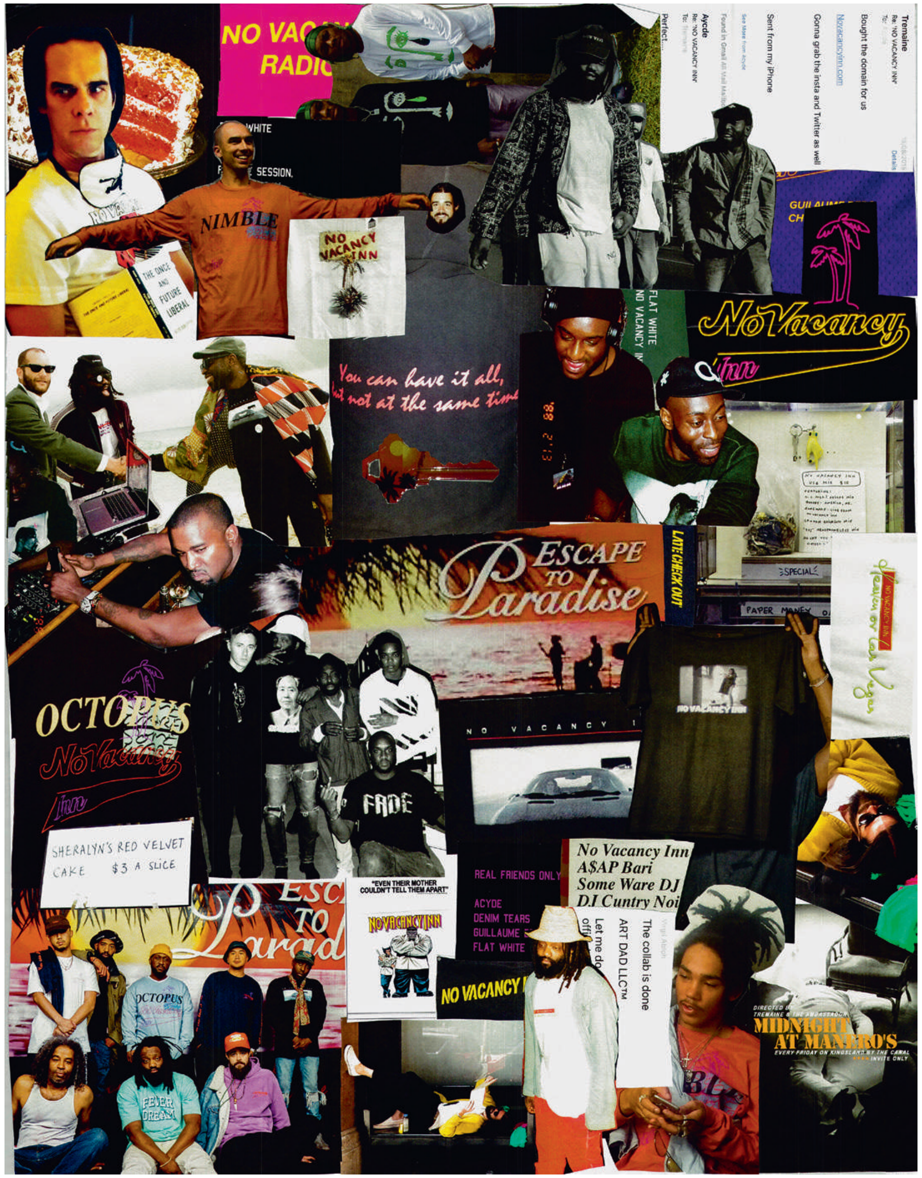
2. Neneh Cherry's 'Buffalo Stance' was a hit single in the US and Europe in 1988. Its title references Buffalo, an underground, multicultural, multidisciplinary creative collective active in London between 1984 and 1989. Founded by stylist Ray Petri, members included photographers (Jamie Morgan and Cameron McVey), models (a teenage Naomi Campbell and Nick Kamen), and musicians.

3. Tina Campt is a Black feminist theorist of visual culture and professor of humanities and modern culture and media at Brown University. Celebrated for her writing on the African diaspora in 20th-century Europe, her groundbreaking book, *Other Germans*, looked at the history of Black Germans under the Third Reich.

No Vacancy Inn

Founded in 2015 between New York, Miami and London by Ade 'Acyde' Odunlami, Tremaine Emory and Brock Korsan, No Vacancy Inn is a multi-disciplinary creative collective moving between and combining music, fashion, radio and nightlife. As hard to define as it is to pin down to any particular place, No Vacancy Inn appears and disappears everywhere from Basel to Bali, organizing pop-up stores in hotel rooms, working on sneaker collabs with New Balance, and clothing collections with Stüssy, as its founders forge a fast-growing reputation as cultural catalysts and visionary agent provocateurs. They remain best-known, though, for the parties they've staged in different spaces in major cities around the world, from basements to rooftops to suburban kitchens. These now-legendary events – playing host to musicians including Kanye West, Frank Ocean and A$AP Rocky, and creatives such as Tom Sachs, Virgil Abloh and Matthew Williams – are spoken of and relayed as IRL cultural touchstones that echo around and are amplified by the digital world. The trio spoke to *System* about the true meaning of social media, the post-pandemic future of congregation, and how to make the intangible the key.

Portrait by Devin Christopher


NO VACANCY RADIO
NIMBLE
NO VACANCY INN
You can have it all, but not at the same time
No Vacancy Inn
ESCAPE TO Paradise
LATE CHECK OUT
OCTOPUS
SHERALYN'S RED VELVET CAKE $3 A slice
NO VACANCY
REAL FRIENDS ONLY
ACYDE
DENIM TEARS
GUILLAUME
FLAT WHITE
No Vacancy Inn
A$AP Bari
Some Ware DJ
DJ Cuntry Noi
The collab is done
ART DAD LLC™
MIDNIGHT AT MANDRO'S
Bought the domain for us
Gonna grab the insta and Twitter as well
Sent from my iPhone
Perfect.

A Partial History by Cali Thornhill Dewitt, 2021
Opposite page, from left to right: Tremaine Emory, Brock Korsan and Ade 'Acyde' Odunlami.

Rahim Attarzadeh: Before we talk about the future of spaces, tell me about how No Vacancy Inn came into being?

Ade 'Acyde' Odunlami: My original instinct was to create a physical space, a store. It was also that period in London when there weren't a lot of concept stores. When I was growing up in London, all of my culture came from record stores and clothing stores. Some were places where you could get a T-shirt and there would be a load of flyers for club nights and records, or associated ephemera. This was all through the 1990s and the 2000s and then it changed because renting spaces in London became more expensive. I wanted to replicate that nostalgia. One of the original ideas we had, because we spent so much time travelling, was to inhabit hotel rooms and turn them into stores. If we were hanging out in the Hôtel Costes, we'd get the biggest room we could and turn it into a pop-up store. We'd do the same at the Sixty LES or the Roosevelt. No Vacancy Inn is a pun, playing with the idea of hotels and rooms.

Tremaine Emory: No Vacancy Inn, never checked in, always checked out!

> **'I am sick of disparaging social media. I think it's easy to use it as a proverbial whip to beat young kids with because that's all they have.'**

At No Vacancy Inn parties and events, the human presence becomes like a transformational moment. Could you look back at an event that really typified how you consciously prepare a space and a set of conditions that – once people were added – became an incredible moment of congregation?

Tremaine: For the launch of our New Balance 990 collaboration, we transformed this space next to the Union store[1] on La Brea into an ephemeral hotel room. We tasked ourselves with making something that didn't feel transactional. We had a mask on the wall from Papua New Guinea. We went to Amoeba Records and bought a bunch of VHS films we like – like *Bull Durham* – films that make us feel something. We had books from one of our favourite bookstores, Arcana Books. We had our friend Jenny Tsiakals, from Please and Thank You vintage store in LA, who is probably the best connoisseur of vintage, pull stuff that she would pull for myself, Acyde and Brock. We had a DJ set up at the foot of the bed, vinyl, CDJs, couches, flowers. We just really wanted to make a space where people didn't feel like they were being shuttled in and out.

In a post-pandemic world, do you think youth congregation will rely on physical space as it once did?

Acyde: What's going to be interesting is the paranoia of going back to spaces, maybe in 2023, and being enclosed in a space where you could get sick. We're going to have to overcome that paranoia. Obviously testing and Covid passports; it's an interesting challenge. Ultimately the kids want to congregate and be together, sharing the same kind of energy that you can feel coming off the pages of Ian Schrager's Studio 54 book.[2]

Tremaine: Pandemic at the disco!

When considering the physicality of the spaces, do you subconsciously choose venues that are steeped in rich cultural history? I remember going to some of your parties at the Scotch of St James in London and I was wondering if you picked that club because of its Swinging Sixties history, with Jimi Hendrix and the Beatles and so on?

Acyde: Interesting question. The most important thing for me and I think for us as a team, is the functionality of a space to inhabit an idea in the best possible way. If it's a club it has to sound good; I have no business being in a club that sounds terrible. The thing about the Scotch is, we discovered it was a live venue and all these different people played there, and these people knew about sound. So if they played there and they haven't changed the space, then it is probably good. The space needs to adhere to the right mathematical equation for sound to travel. That's really what we are enchanted by. The purpose of the physical space is to house music.

Tremaine: The first time we DJed in the big room – this is before you heard Top-40 hip hop in nightclubs – we had to fight to play rap music. I'm not talking about the 1980s or 1990s, but the last decade. One of the owners comes to me and said Dita Von Teese is about to leave if she hears one more rap record, so Acyde put on Tyler, the Creator. We didn't choose the physical spaces. We got in where we could fit in.

Can you recall a venue you hosted, where the physical space itself was in synergy with challenging the system or a changing of the guard?

Brock Korsan: We were in Paris and Will Welch from *GQ* hit us up to say we're going to do something tonight at L'Avenue. The next thing you know, Acyde is playing the most irreverent songs. It was one of those moments. Within such a tight space, it seemed as if time stood still.

Tremaine: That party was around Virgil's first Louis Vuitton show; it represented the changing of the guard.

Acyde: I just remember Virgil saying you can play anything you want if the crowd trusts you. All I do, when playing records, is share cultural milestones that I find interesting. Moments of culture caught as sound; one record represents 1977, one 1987, another 2017. The physical space was the crystallisation of this ideology.

Do you think culture needs a geographical capital now?

Tremaine: The reason why that worked in the past is because you could afford to live in cities. I feel we do a disservice to these kids saying you have to come to Paris or New York or LA because it's too expensive – it destroys them. The culture you foster from the place you grew up in is just as important. I know that's tough, because with some of the places where these kids come from, it isn't safe to be themselves.

Brock: Currently within the US, there is huge migration to Austin and Nashville. If we are doing things virtually, we don't have to absorb these high costs of inflation to be somewhere that you deem culturally relevant. I think we are going to find new 'capitals' of culture. That is happening right before our very eyes.

Acyde: People went to cities to get away – look at New York in the 1970s. Within that space, New York gave birth to several genres of music. Punk, rap, then hip hop, disco, salsa. That happened because the city was more or less bankrupt and that's why free jazz appeared. Now in this era of Covid, there are parts of London that are getting abandoned because rent is astronomical, so all of a sudden, cities are becoming open spaces again. A futurist thinks about how to build a new city that has the natural alchemy that comes from these cultural collisions, and which sustains culture. That's why Kanye West is so interesting. He showed me the plans for what he is trying to build in Wyoming. He's gone full Buckminster Fuller, with sustainable pods and underground living.[3] He said when he was a kid, he didn't know anyone who lived in great architecture, and neither did I until I met our friend Caius Pawson.[4] He was the first person whose living surroundings were actual great architecture. We all grew up in these brutalist tower blocks in London, leftovers from Le Corbusier's communal living idea.

Will No Vacancy Inn own a physical space in the future?

Acyde: When you think about Supreme or Stüssy, a part of their ability to connect is that they actually have physical spaces where people can live within the brand. We need to dialogue with the kids who buy our stuff and interact with us. I think that is the point about space, to bring it 360° to your overarching theme. No Vacancy Inn could be a hotel or a store, or a wall for social climbing if that's what people want.

Will physical interaction remain at the core of spaces and No Vacancy Inn, despite living in an Internet age?

Acyde: If you look back at the conception of skateboarding, it had to happen outside. No one skateboarded in their own living room successfully. Kids in California found abandoned swimming pools and turned them into skate bowls. They took what spaces already existed and made them work for them. We now have this virtual space that never existed back then and within that we are having these conversations through our own parcel of space. How people absorb information through a physical, virtual or personal space is the entry level of stimulus we need to progress.

Brock: I think the Internet and technology has created a great migration for artists and creatives not to have to be in these physical spaces and for their work to live on virtually.

On one hand, the Internet has become this ceaseless digital space or diaspora for documenting sub-cultural activity, but on the other hand social media has made culture appear more ephemeral today.

Acyde: Social media is just a tool for access; it's a skeleton key to the world library of information. I am sick of disparaging social media because I think it's easy to use it as a proverbial whip to beat young kids with because that's all they have. It's only a point of entry.

Tremaine: We're cultural anthropologists. Andy Warhol has been dead since 1987, but he is still art-directing culture; just like Miles Davis who died in 1991. That is the highest form of creative direction, existing in the real world. It's a derivative of real culture. Social media is just the CliffsNotes of culture. Jay-Z has this lyric where he is like, 'When you could look in the mirror like, "There I am".' When you are looking in the mirror, no matter what type of space culture is manifested in, you are the cultural provocateur.

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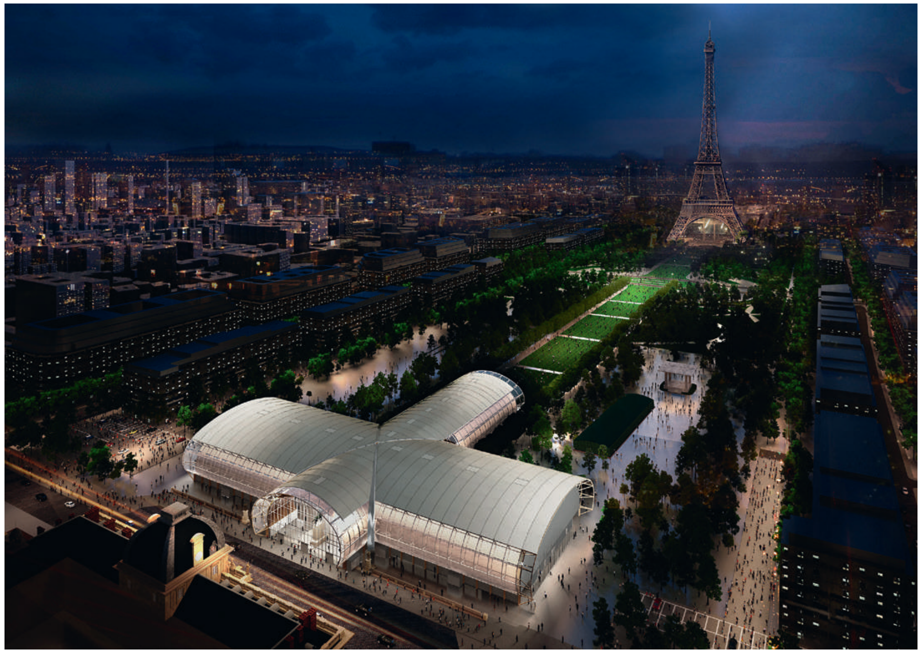
[1] Union Store on South La Brea Avenue in Los Angeles is a streetwear boutique founded by Chris Gibbs.

[2] Ian Schrager ran legendary New York nightclub Studio 54 from 1977 and until 1980 when he was convicted of tax fraud. *Studio 54*, a book chronicling its history, was published in 2017 by Rizzoli.

[3] R. Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983) was an American architect, engineer and futurist. His most well-known invention is the geodesic dome, a lightweight structure whose total strength grows in ratio to its size. The most famous example was the US pavilion at the 1967 Montreal Expo. Kanye West is believed to be building housing domes on his Wyoming ranch.

[4] Son of celebrated British architect John Pawson, Caius Pawson founded independent record label Young Turks, renamed Young in April 2021.



Chris Dercon

As president of the Réunion des musées nationaux-Grand Palais, Chris Dercon is charged with the future of 34 of France's national museums, visited by 2.5 million people in a normal year, and including many of the most prestigious spaces and institutions in Paris. In his long career, Dercon has made a name for himself both as an innovative producer of popular exhibitions – including one of the first museum shows of Martin Margiela's work and the hit Tate Modern exhibition *Matisse: The Cut-Outs*, which transferred to MoMA – and as the curator of some of the world's most dynamic cultural spaces, from PS1 in New York, to Munich's Haus der Kunst and London's Tate Modern, where he oversaw the Herzog and de Meuron-designed extension. In Paris, his latest construction project is the Grand Palais Éphémère, a huge temporary structure designed by architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower, set to replace the majestic iron and glass Grand Palais during its renovation. Chris Dercon met with Claudia Donaldson on Zoom to discuss rituals, public places, intimacy, and why it's time to take museum shops more seriously.

Portrait by Nicolas Krief

© Wilmotte & Associés

Artist's rendering of the Grand Palais Éphémère on the Champ-de-Mars, Paris

Claudia Donaldson: Chris, it's great to meet you. Where are you Zooming in from?
Chris Dercon: Paris, from my office opposite the Bassin de l'Arsenal. We have a few offices… I mean, we *do* have a lot of sites right now! We have two building sites: the Grand Palais Éphémère, on the Champ-de-Mars, and on the other side [of the Seine] the Grand Palais, which we are going to close in a few weeks for a complete renovation. Altogether, it's a 75,000 square metre area: an interconnection of three different buildings in the heart of Paris, bordered by the Champs-Élysées, the Seine, and Les Invalides.

The renovation of the Grand Palais started in 2018, right?
It actually started in 2013. There was a competition in 2013 and some plans were made, but things have changed in the meantime. The questions we were asking about cultural infrastructure in 2013 were completely different to those we are asking now, and not just because of the pandemic. We have to simplify things, make them safer. We have to think about the economy, about sustainability. And we have to think about museums as cultural infrastructure that is always going to change, I think, for the better.

> **'We miss audiences. I'm sure the artworks in empty museums come off the wall, console each other and start to cry, like in André Breton's *Nadja*.'**

What do you think the Grand Palais represents to fashion as a medium of spectacle and congregation? Hermès hold its Saut horse trials there – they even named a bag after it –and there's the long-standing relationship with Chanel. I remember being at Chanel's gigantic 'supermarket' show in 2014 with Rihanna and Cara Delevingne pushing each other in trolleys up and down the aisles, models wielding chainsaws in the DIY section and carting packets of Coco Chanel Pops around in their baskets. Karl Lagerfeld was riffing on art and fashion and daily life, but in that context it felt like an expression of something bigger.
Horses and the Grand Palais have always gone together; the entrance from the basement is actually called the 'paddock'; it was made for horses. Regarding Karl Lagerfeld: we started working with Chanel in 2006, and it's an ongoing collaboration; they are also major sponsors of the renovation. Apparently, Lagerfeld fell in love with the location, the space of the Grand Palais, and especially with the glass roof. He was really inspired by all of the fabulous events held at the Grand Palais in the past: the radical and avant-garde *salons artistiques*, but also shows about locomotion, mobility, aeronautical machines, all visited as much by the general public as by the avant-garde. When I think about the Lagerfeld sets, I also think back to Monumenta, when artists like Anish Kapoor and Anselm Kiefer were invited to come up with large-scale installations.

You're known for bringing an interdisciplinary approach to your cultural programming. You put on a Margiela show at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in 1997, when fashion wasn't readily accepted by museum institutions. You've also put on exhibitions showcasing the work of architects and designers like Herzog and de Meuron and Konstantin Grcic. How do you plan to bring this kind of eclecticism to the Grand Palais?
I don't call it eclecticism; I call it building relationships. Today, more than ever, all of these disciplines are talking to each other and we expect artists to look beyond their own disciplines. Herzog and de Meuron, for example, work with fashion, with sport, with museums; they *build* museums. I like to use the words of my German mentor Alexander Kluge, who works and writes in the same way as W.G. Sebald, and speaks about the 'convoy of the arts' and 'gardening'. You bring all of these different things together in a garden and then work from plot to plot – that's how you start to see these relationships and understand them.

That touches on the importance and role of people – both creatives and the public – when you're creating a space. When Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano were building the Pompidou, it was dismissed as a 'cultural supermarket' influenced by the Fun Palace and the ideology of Cedric Price and the Archigram movement, but if that kind of curiosity and social consciousness is placed at the heart of architecture then it attracts a much more varied museum audience, a bigger audience, a younger audience. How much is the role of the audience a consideration when you're building and programming spaces?
I am glad that you bring this up because finally – *finally* – we are taking the public seriously, not least as an effect of the pandemic. We miss audiences. At night I am sure that the artworks in empty museums come off the wall, console each other and start to cry, like in André Breton's *Nadja*. Curators are starting to think that perhaps it's not just the collection that matters, but also the audience, especially *local* audiences, because there are no tourists at the moment. And I'm glad that you mention supermarkets again. One example of taking the audience more seriously is that we have to take museum shops more seriously, so long as we render services as much as products.

> **'The strangeness of museums leads to other ways of behaving. I see people act differently in museums; they even *move* differently than in other spaces.'**

Museums are also going to have to adapt to us and our new expectations. Like, as you say, the idea of the shop in the cultural institution and what you can express there. I think about what Sarah Andelman did with colette, totally transforming fashion retail, and also Carla Sozzani and what 10 Corso Como brought to Milan, changing its local area. We have Dover Street Market in London and other cities in the world. These places bring together different realities and transform the ways that we think about commerce. Your friend [Italian philosopher] Emanuele Coccia calls commerce the 'forum of things'. Could you tell us a bit more about this idea of commerce within the Grand Palais or the Grand Palais Éphémère. How will retail spaces influence your planning?
I recently discovered in our archives the inventories of the museum boutiques at the end of the 19th century in Versailles.

What kind of things did they sell?
They sold etchings and posters; they sold photographs, which we now call postcards; they sold books, little booklets, that were purely inventory because the group-show catalogue was a much later invention. We want to try out different things, but the most important thing we can learn from colette, the Vitra House in Weil am Rhein and Corso Como is that the shop needs to be an *experience*. You need to create an environment for both financial and cultural transactions. I am a great fan of those museum shops that tell little stories. You can start to 'play museum' in boutiques; you can teach people to look at things differently. If you put books by Peter Saville next to those of graphic designers working in the Low Countries in the 1920s and 1930s, you tell a story! You want to entice through curiosity. You want people both to buy books and to say, 'That's interesting – there is a correlation.'

It makes me think about what happened post-May 1968, and how the Pompidou was influenced by Parisian society at that time. It was a time – and perhaps it is a time now – to envision a different kind of public and to promote the shift from a passive audience to a participatory one. Do you think that museums and cultural institutions can serve as a place of exchange and dialogue during times of flux?
During the 20th century we had times when people were rethinking what an exhibition was and what role the public was playing. It happened in the 1920s, the 1930s, the 1960s, and it's happening again now. We never took those efforts very seriously, I think. The fact that the Centre Pompidou turned into a more normal institution with conventional separations after only a couple of years is testament to that. Now there are all the questions we have to ask ourselves about governance, staffing, ethical sponsorship, the relationship between private and public, commercial and non-commercial. In all of these questions is a sub-question: what is the role of the public? I think about an expanded notion of culture as something invented by a public executing its interactive rights when it says: 'I would like to listen to this; I would like to see that; I would like to use an exhibition this way.' The role of the public is becoming more essential. When you think about rituals in our civilization, the ideal place for rituals in ancient times was the theatre. In the Middle Ages, and also probably the baroque period, it was the cathedral and the chateau, too. And then, at a certain moment, the museum became the ideal place for ritual. But in order to keep it that way, we have to reinvent the museum.

For me, a ritual is an obsession that brings comfort and safety. In this context, it makes me think about huge, non-programmed spaces, such as at Tate Modern, which you were so influential in transforming: those halls and other areas where visitors can do what they want. Whenever I go there with my kids, they're happiest running riot in the Turbine Hall, while I look for a comfortable chair and a cup of coffee…
Tate Modern is a very good example because it's an ultra-democratic

place. In museums, we are all together, both individually and as a collective. In Tate Modern, in the new MoMA, at the Bourse de Commerce by Pinault in Paris, our museum spaces are invaded by what? By chairs and by tables! We are starting to use museum spaces as something quite different – and we are going to do exactly the same at the new Grand Palais. We want to use museums and cultural infrastructure as a place for encounters. And why does it work? It works because there is little public space left. We feel unsafe in the public spaces that we know, so we have to reinvent the idea of it. We can do that in museums, because they are places that feel both safe and strange.

In the past you've also often complained that museums are too big. How do we reconcile their size with the need for intimate spaces?
The museum is a collective space *and* an intimate space. When you visit the museum, you can easily be alone and isolate yourself, but you can also visit with a group. It's a socializing space, but it gives you the liberty to choose how to socialize. Woody Allen – maybe it's a bad name right now – but he said that the museum is the ideal space for meeting people, and it's true! When you are in a museum, you see strange things; you see works of art that make you feel different. You can be a different person. The strangeness of museums leads to another way of behaving. I've seen in my work that people act differently in museums; they even *move* differently than in other spaces.

Do you think the public will be quick to re-embrace these spaces? Or do you think there's going to be a longer-term reluctance to engage with cultural moments? You've been talking about togetherness…
It's not a reluctance, but we have to learn how to behave again. We have to adapt to all the situations. You're interested in design and architecture, so you remember the first lockdown when we saw everywhere in the city interiors and exteriors changed by do-it-yourself architecture. All this tape hanging everywhere, all that cardboard everywhere. Now suddenly we see infrastructure that is inspired by that ephemera, but highly designed. It's very interesting that the way we look at architecture, both interior and exterior, is completely changing. But we are *hesitant*, because we are not used to it yet. We have to adapt ourselves.

The Grand Palais Éphémère is going to replace the Grand Palais during the renovation. Temporary structures are often a way to experiment; indeed, you've referred to this amazing wooden structure and its space as a testing ground. What is your vision for it?
The Grand Palais Éphémère is almost as large as the central nave of the Grand Palais, so it's a unique kind of double. But where the nave at the Grand Palais is completely transparent, like a glasshouse, this one is not, because we built it in collaboration with the Olympic Games and while that might make you think of live events, the games are even more media events. So the Grand Palais Éphémère is about 10,000 square metres of floor space that feels like a huge TV or cinema studio. That gives us a way to experiment with projection. That gives us a way to say to our customers, to our collaborators working in fashion or art or ecology, that they can use this space in a variety of really different ways.

Does your programming for this year and 2022 take coronavirus restrictions into consideration?
One of the big advantages of the Grand Palais Éphémère is that you can put a crowd of a thousand people in the space and they're still socially distanced. We don't need to put chairs down; people can just lie on the floor, just like they did in the Turbine Hall during Olafur Eliasson's wonderful *Weather Project* installation. That means we can offer much more than cinema and theatre; we can do fashion shows, opera, theatre, dance. One of the first things we will do is invite Boris Charmatz to come and dance in that space. He doesn't use the fourth wall; he makes dance installations where the public can move around quite freely. In the first season we will have lots of live stuff that is currently constrained by the health restrictions and the architecture of theatres, dance halls and opera houses. We are coming back to a time – think of Walter Gropius and Maholy-Nagy's Bauhaus 'total theatre' – when we have to reinvent not just museums but also theatres, cinemas and shopping architecture. I don't want to say that it's an exciting time, but it is an *important* time.

You seem to have a strong sense of responsibility. Do you feel the weight of executing a vision for these spaces? How do you go about that?
Because of the Grand Palais's size and layout – and the Grand Palais Éphémère's the same – it's a space where we can programme many different activities at the same time to create experiences for many different individuals or groups of people. That's our economic basis and also the cultural task we have been given. We have a *huge* responsibility towards these users, visitors and participants. You have to create the best possible conditions for an experience or a set of experiences different to normal life in these spaces. That's going to enrich us and also the city. We are not alone in this. It all comes down to that famous philosophical question: Who am I, that I am here?

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Artist's rendering of the Grand Palais and the Jardin des Champs-Élysées, Paris

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Words by Ocean Vuong

Gian Giacomo Caprotti to Leonardo Da Vinci

‡

The money gone, I followed you
to the edge of you—only to find the city
sinking. Streets lit with dawn's bluest
seconds. But it was the flecks of amber
slipping between the chimneys
that had us running. Dim alleys leading
to nowhere—or water. I stepped
into your life with Chutzpah
as if my birthday suit was
Valentino. That sudden
brightness. That hour before Venice
vanished beneath its crowd. Hour
of birdsong falling like pebbles
on the promenade
& the year's first widow chanting
a new name into the sea, her black dress a stitch
in the shore. O, brief inventor, make me new
again. Because the heart fails not
in its breaking—but the tightening.

Because the sun came on. The piazza erupted
in panels of blood. & you
were still my king. & I, still,
your king.

VALENTINO

Photograph: Marcus Ohlsson

The Gio Questionnaire: Giovanna Engelbert

By Loïc Prigent

Tell me, what have you learned since you started working and designing at Swarovski?
I started here during the pandemic and the fact that we still managed to relaunch such a big brand has taught me that everything is possible.

How many Louis Vuitton bags do you own?
Not enough. There are never enough…

Which is the best airline?
I'll fly with anyone right now; I miss flying.

Which is the best hotel in the world?
Suvretta House in St Moritz.

What did you learn from Franca Sozzani?
The way to work.

Everybody remembers your name, but what's your trick when you've forgotten the name of someone you're introduced to?
I introduce them to the person next to me – and hope that *they've* never met before.

Which qualities does a good model need to succeed and last in the business?
Intellect, passion and grace.

Which is better: two big rings or ten smaller rings?
We have two hands, so go with both!

Pick your three favourite Barbara Kruger quotes.
'Your body is a battleground.' 'Fear and hate will make you small, bitter, and mean.' 'I shop therefore I am.'

Do you have any wisdom about really fancy wedding dresses that you wish to pass on to future generations of brides?
Make your dream come true! Don't think about anyone else – it's your happiness that counts. And don't forget that happiness could also mean wearing a simple white T-shirt. It all depends on your mindset.

You're stuck in the same fashion show for a year, but you can choose the two people you get to sit between and the brand.
That's a good one! Anna Dello Russo would be great fun at a Gucci or Balenciaga show. Or, maybe a Louis Vuitton show, so I could also visit the Louvre and enjoy the great music – the soundtrack for the last show was epic. And it would be with Alexia from *System*!

What would a Giovanna × Gio Ponti collaboration – it's called Giovanna Ponti! – look like?
Colourful!

Which three new designers can't you stop wearing?
Chopova Lowena; Wales Bonner; Bode.

When did you discover you could inspire people?
I hope that I've been inspiring people with my editorial work ever since I started at *Vogue Italia* and *L'Uomo Vogue*.

Who has the best laugh?
Gwendoline Christie.

Who is the funniest person in fashion? (Deliberately funny, of course!)
Anna Dello Russo, and Stefano Gabbana when he's in the mood. Azzedine was really funny, too.

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